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Divided Loyalties:
A Reconciling Ethic For Churches
In Northern Ireland

by

Lesley Elizabeth Carroll

Being a Thesis submitted for the
Degree of
Doctor in Philosophy
in the University of Dublin

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SUMMARY OF THESIS

Can a denomination publicly engage with those who are different and maintain its own theological integrity? Can a biblically, theologically and ecumenically informed ethic be developed to sustain a denomination in such engagement? These questions are at the heart of this thesis and arise out of a theological concern that churches find ways to publicly bear witness to the gospel, specifically in Northern Ireland, seeking fuller conversion to God and the transformation of society. In situations, like that in Northern Ireland, where there is cultural and ethnic competition, the ethic will necessarily be a reconciling ethic.

Methodologically, a reconciling ethic for engagement is reflected throughout this thesis as I shall draw different theological and ecclesial streams into the debate. The ethic is developed from within the Reformed tradition, represented by *The Westminster Confession of Faith,* but will also draw on the Roman Catholic Church's insights at *Vatican II* and on the work of *An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics*, an ecumenical group based in Ireland. This engaged methodology will be enhanced by critical reflection on the history of Irish Presbyterianism, adopting hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval, and may be described as an 'ecumenical' methodology.

As the maintenance of theological integrity is a key concern for churches, I shall set out themes and principles, in Chapter One, which affirm churches as rooted in their own ecclesial traditions, calling for hermeneutical awareness and inviting openness to others. The challenge of remaining loyal to God in situations of ethnic and cultural competition is addressed as a matter of theological integrity and ecclesial authenticity, specifically with reference to Reformed theological and ecclesiological commitments and priorities.

In contexts where there is political and cultural competition issues of loyalty and places of belonging come to the fore. For the Church, in such situations, there are questions about whom its member's primary loyalty is owed to. In Chapter Two I shall probe what it means for Reformed Christians to be faithful to God in a loyalty that transcends all other loyalties. Loyalty will be presented as a

dynamic, theologically informed idea which can be developed into an adjudicating principle. With this in view, I shall put under scrutiny the historic period of the United Irish Rebellion in 1798, when Irish Presbyterians were politically divided, to ascertain how far transcending loyalty to God can be said to be a common, binding factor where there is political division.

Having established that loyalty to God takes primacy over all other loyalties, I shall, in Chapter Three, explore how loyalties are adjudicated by the Christian community. I shall argue that this adjudication requires the Church to understand itself as a hermeneutical community but that boundaries are required – whether scriptural, theological or confessional – to provide guidance for the hermeneutical process of contextually applying scripture and living in creative fidelity to God. As the confessional standard for Irish Presbyterianism is *The Westminster Confession of Faith,* the subscription controversies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (which turned upon contesting views on adherence to *The Westminster Confession*), will be explored. I shall ask how far churches require boundaries to interpretive space and establish that boundaried space is the preferred ecclesiological option of Irish Presbyterians.

In Chapter Four, I shall turn to the question of interpretive space. Discussion about space, who occupies the space and who can move in and out of that space, is raised with regard to interdenominational relationships given that not all denominations adopt the same standards of faith. I shall argue that relationships between the denominations are crucial in bearing radical witness to the gospel. There are, however, those who have difficulty with interchurch relationships. How far difficulties regarding interchurch relationships can be challenged by divergent understandings of unity, and the dialogue and mutual accountability provoked by these, will be tested, with particular reference to *The World Council of Churches.* I shall then turn, by way of an historic test case, to the formation of The General Assembly in 1840 and to Presbyterian relationships with other denominations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, challenging Presbyterians to retrieve memories of different ecclesial

models and styles of relationship which do not compromise the church's faith and mission.

Taking account of the implications of belonging in primary loyalty to God, and of the challenge to explicate that loyalty in open but boundaried space, I shall develop a reconciling ethic for engagement with those who are different. In Chapter Five, therefore, I will propose an ethic which will enable participants to express their own tradition and experience by developing the idea of 'concrete' other. In order to enable as many as possible to engage publicly with one another the ethic will take account of exclusions inevitable if agreements are made before engagement. I shall propose that agreements are to be situated within the process of engagement, rather than being prerequisites to it. Finally, for churches concerned with consensual, yet principled moral outcomes, and therefore about imperfect outcomes, I shall argue that provisional goals may be accepted. The case is, then, made that this ethic provides a credible way forward in the interests of reconciliation and engagement where ecclesiastical boundaries are contested and both societies and churches are divided.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page number
Declaration		i
Summary		ii
Acknowledgements		v
Table of contents		vi
Introduction		1
CHAPTER ONE		
PRINCIPLES AND PARAMETERS:		
Clearing the ground and sign-posting the way		
1.	Setting the scene:	
	key themes and understandings	13
1.1	The Church in its context	13
1.2	What is the Church?	14
1.3	Scriptural discourse as essential	15
1.4	An ecumenical methodology	16
1.5	Discursive themes in the conversation	16
2.	The Purpose of the Church:	
	Mission and self-understanding	17
2.1	The Church and mission	17
2.2	Proclamation, dialogue and mission	21
2.3	The identity debate	25
2.4	Identity, uniqueness and integration	30
2.5	Loyalty in situations of cultural competition	31
2.6	Loyalty or idolatry?	35
3.	The Shaping of the Church:	
	The influence of past and present	40
3.1	The Church with a sense of place	40
3.2	The Church 'catholic' and its sense of history	44
4.	Themes And Influences:	
	Informing the discussion	48
4.1	The centrality of a scriptural discourse	48
4.2	Ecclesial streams in the discussion	51
4.3	The methodology of the conversation	52

5. Conclusion: A threefold framework 54

CHAPTER TWO

BEGINNING IN BELONGING

Part I: The identity of the Church

1. Setting the scene: a question of belonging 65
1.1 The Church in its context 65
1.2 The effects of competing identities on the Church 66
1.3 Loyalty to God above all other loyalties 68
1.4 Ethnic allegiance as a powerful force in shaping identity 73
1.5 Competing identities challenge the churches 75
2. Conflicting allegiances: to what resources can the Church turn? 76
2.1 The question for the Church 76
2.2 Insights from the Evangelical tradition 78
2.3 Relational belonging affects the identity of the Church 80
3. The Church in relationship with God: conversion as the hermeneutical key 81
3.1 Theological discourse on identity in conversion 81
3.2 Identity in conversion and implications for Confessional traditions 84
3.3 Challenges in the Northern Irish context 86
4. Identity in conversion: a view from scripture 88
4.1 Scriptural discourse on ethnic belonging within the world of grace 88
4.2 A Reformed view from Croatia 89
4.3 Hermeneutics, suspicion and taking scripture seriously 91
5. Conclusion: Loyalty to God relativizes all other loyalties 94

CHAPTER TWO

BEGINNING IN BELONGING

Part II: A conversation with history

The United Irishmen and Ulster Presbyterian Radicalism

1. The Conversation 103
2. The roots of Presbyterian radicalism 104
3. Social and economic conditions in eighteenth century Ireland 106
4. Presbyterian ecclesiastical context 108
5. The United Irish Society 110
6. Rev. James Porter 1784 – 1798 114
7. Rev. Dr. William Steel Dickson 1744 – 1824 120
8. Overarching loyalty to God? 129

CHAPTER THREE

BELONGING AND BEING:

Part 1: Thinking about how to be the Church

1. Setting the scene: a question of how to be the Church 141

1.1 The Church in its context 141

1.2 The Church and the authority of scripture 142

1.3 Scripture and the life of the Church 144

1.4 A view from the WCC 146

1.5 An ecumenical hermeneutic 149

2. Boundaried interpretive space: limiting the hermeneutical space 151

2.1 Insight from scripture 151

2.2 Interplay and interpretation 153

2.3 Church history and interpretive boundaries 155

3. Context and interpretation: rooted hermeneutical community 157

3.1 The Church and cultural setting 157

3.2 A brief history of hermeneutics 161

3.3 Adjudicating between interpretations 164

4. Hermeneutical community: the Church's self-understanding 167

4.1 Reading scripture as a way of transformation 167
4.2 Inescapable realities 168
4.3 Secularism, pluralism and hermeneutical community 171
4.4 The Church as a bridge 173
5. Conclusion: The Church as hermeneutical community 175

CHAPTER THREE
BELONGING AND BEING:
Part II: A conversation with history
Boundaried interpretive space in Irish Presbyterianism

1. The subscription controversies 186
2. Background to the Irish subscription controversies 187
3. The first subscription controversy 190
4. The second subscription controversy 199
5. The importance of boundaries and space in Irish Presbyterianism 204

CHAPTER FOUR
ALLEGIANCE TO GOD
PART I: Loyalty and difference within the churches

1. Setting the scene: a question of witness in a divided world 216
1.1 The Church in its context 216
1.2 Bearing witness as denominations 219
1.3 The dynamics of exclusivism 221
1.4 Denominations and institutionalized difference 222
1.5 An alternative to divided witness 225
1.6 The WCC provides a case study to examine unity as a contested idea 227
2. Framing the question: the challenge of social contact hypothesis 229
2.1 Social contact theory and ethno-political conflict 229
2.2 South African churches in a divided society 233

2.3 Scripture as the record of a dialogue urges dialogue among denominations 235
2.4 Employing a hermeneutic of inclusion 238
2.5 Division, theological integrity and denominational relationships 239
2.6 The theological challenge of social psychology to the churches 241
2.7 Exclusivism, chosenness and the challenge to relationships 243
3. Striving for unity: the dream caught in a web of difference 245
3.1 The desire for unity 245
3.2 The question of difference 246
3.3 Unity as a contested idea 248
3.4 From comparison to consensus within the WCC 251
3.5 Implications for the churches 253
4. Conversion to God: living unity in difference 254
4.1 Theological discourse on denominations and conversion 254
4.2 Implications for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland 256
4.3 Choosing costly living 258
4.4 Dealing with the fear of change 260
5. Conclusion: a *Koinonia* ethic for inclusive denominational relationships 262

CHAPTER FOUR

ALLEGIANCE TO GOD:

Part II: A conversation with history

Irish Presbyterianism and the dynamics of union and separation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

1. Introduction 278
2. From separation to union in the founding of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland 280
3. Irish Presbyterians and inter-church

relationships on the island of Ireland 286
4. Irish Presbyterians and the WCC 301
5. Conclusions: Irish Presbyterianism can reclaim an impulse towards unity 305

CHAPTER FIVE

A RECONCILING ETHIC:

Ecclesia semper reformanda

1. Setting the scene: a question of lifestyle 312
1.1 The Church in its context 312
1.2 A task for the Church in its context 317
2. Theological guidelines for an ethic for engagement 321
2.1 Conversion and the openness of the Church, *ecclesia semper reformanda* 321
2.2 Reconciliation, rooted in conversion and seeking transformation 325
3. Dynamic identity: an ethic for conversion through engagement 329
3.1 The contours of an ethic for engagement 329
3.2 Encountering the other – committing to one another 333
3.3 Encountering diversity – finding commonality 338
3.4 Encountering imperfect – enabling ethical engagement 343
4. Towards reconciliation: From disengaged concern to ethical living 345
4.1 A concern for distinctiveness 345
4.2 A concern about relativism 348
4.3 An appeal for communication and community 350
4.4 The search for a universal moral language in the language of human rights 353
4.5 Reconciliation as a way of engaging in the public realm 355
5. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*:

	inhabiting one another's worlds	360
5.1	Symbolising the ethic for engagement	359
5.2	Sustaining the Church in an ethic of inhabiting other worlds	360
5.3	Applying the ethic in Northern Ireland	362
5.4	A model from a local community	364
6.	Conclusion: from arrogance to dialogue	366

CONCLUSION:
A RECONCILING ETHIC FOR THE CHURCHES IN NORTHERN IRELAND 376

Appendix A:	The Coleraine Declaration	384
Appendix B:	Mission Statement of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland	395
Appendix C:	Declaration and resolutions of the Society of United Irishmen of Belfast	397
Appendix D:	Presbyterian ministers and probationers suspected of involvement in the 1798 Rebellion	399
Appendix E:	The Church's Peace Vocation	402
Appendix F:	Act of Union, 1840	404
Appendix G:	The Falls and Shankill Think Tanks	407
Appendix H:	The Lower Antrim Road Clergy Fellowship	410
Appendix I:	A view from a local congregation	413

BIBLIOGRAPHY 422

INTRODUCTION

At the cross, at the cross,
Where I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away –
It was there by faith
I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day.

This verse from a hymn echoes the experience of my childhood in the Evangelical wing of Irish Presbyterianism. The repeated calls to conversion, made at evangelistic rallies, were the invitation to know personally the freedom that comes from turning to God. Like John Bunyan's 'Pilgrim' I approached the foot of the cross weighed down by the burden of sin. I discovered a God who knew my sins and did not turn away from me.

This should have been the end of it. A life put right with God, it seemed, needed nothing more. There was no comment on the situation of violence that pertained in Northern Ireland during those years. Yet, for me, there remained a world of contradictions. Made right with God, we were not made right with our neighbours from whom we were politically and denominationally different. I continued to live in a world where difference manifested itself in sectarian violence. It is the sense of difference, 'resolved' through violence, and its effects on Church and society, which has given rise to this thesis. James Newton Poling, in his reflections on the abuse of power, notes how an awareness of difference can call forth thought:

> Reflection begins with the presence of difference and otherness in experience. Difference provokes thought. [1]

The immediate context of my reflection is Northern Ireland, in the broader context of Western European and North American experience. This context is marked by a decentralization of the Church, a shift in ethical decision-making to the private realm and increased ethnic conflict. At the beginning of the twenty first century the conflict in Northern Ireland takes its place alongside ethnic conflicts across the world in the form of a peace process still dragging out after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The political process and the community process of building peace lurches on in a society unclear about the kind of progress it desires. The World, it would seem, is little different from the days of the Great War when Wilfred Owen penned his words:

> O World of many worlds, O life of lives,
> What centre hast thou? Where am I?
> O whither is it thy fierce onrush drives?
> Fight it, or drift; or stand; or fly? [2]

Fight, drift, stand or fly – how is the Church to respond to the questions raised by the cycle of ethnic violence, when the influence of the Church now takes its place amid a myriad of other influences? A response will be sought for the churches through the development of a possible ethic for engagement to assist in the process of transforming church and world. The ethic will be biblically and theologically informed and may be defined as an ethic for conversion. I will return to the theme of conversion, retrieving and reinterpreting the theme of my childhood in the light of the wider context of Northern Ireland, the ecumenical movement and a world caught in a crisis of ethnic identity. Unity and mission, effective witness and ethical engagement with the world, informed by theological and biblical themes are the interest of this thesis, as a process of considering

how the churches can more effectively bear witness in divided societies and contribute to their transformation.

The methodology employed in this thesis follows a pattern of theological reflection which is biblically, ecumenically and denominationally informed. This reflection is then brought into conversation with an aspect of Irish Presbyterian history, considered with regard to the findings of the theological reflection. This methodology may be said to be ecumenical. For the purpose of this thesis the requirements for an ecumenical methodology can be adapted from the work of Gillian Evans.[3] The conversation, to be truly ecumenical in its methodology, will require, firstly, respect for the different strands of thinking emerging both in the theological discussion and from the historical context entering the conversation. Secondly, there must be openness to learning and to hearing what insights exist within the historical situation for our particular time and place, particularly as they come from those who are not 'our own'.[4] This will require that selflessness be developed and openness to accept being wrong or prejudiced.[5]

Evans further explicates principles for openness in which she points to a common historical reflection not in order that memories should be modified but rather that they be purified. So it is that in the conversation with history there may be illuminations that would purify memory and enable the Church to better bear effective witness to the Gospel of Christ.

Throughout the thesis, I employ a hermeneutic of retrieval, seeking insight and guidance from my own Reformed, Irish Presbyterian tradition. This tradition is represented here by *The Westminster Confession of Faith* and the Reformation principle, *ecclesia semper reformanda,* affirming the identity of the churches, formed, reformed and always reforming. To demonstrate continuities between the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions I shall occasionally draw on the documents of *Vatican*

II. In the Northern Irish context these traditional ecclesial strands have been supplemented and critiqued by *An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics* [6], which provides alternative, source material valuable in a divided context.

The first chapter prepares the way for the movement towards an ethic to inform the churches in their practice in divided societies, looking for the transformation of Church and society, by laying out key themes and understandings. It will be argued that for the Church to bear effective witness it cannot divorce itself from its immediate historical context. The broader synchronic and diachronic context also shapes the Church in its traditions and responses as the community of God's people, a community of mission. As a community of mission and focused on scripture as the key, authoritative text, the Church is faced with the task of interpreting the teaching of scripture for its time and place. An ethic must, therefore, be concerned to inform and direct the churches towards effective witness in their particular contexts.

The context for mission is explicated in acknowledgement of the array of ethnic conflicts which have followed from the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. It will be asked how the churches can respond in situations of contested space and ethnic conflict given that they too reflect the society in which they find themselves and are also called to witness to something other than the dynamics of division and separation. In Northern Ireland the challenge was identified by Evangelicals who, in 1988, produced a booklet challenging Christians not only to pray for peace but also to work for peace. They sought to provide some guidelines and learning; challenged Christians on those debilitating allegiances which would disengage them from the process of building peace; and invited them to renewed commitment to God.

> As citizens of heaven, our primary loyalty is to the Lord Jesus Christ. All other loyalties are secondary and must be judged by the values and priorities of this one. It is idolatry to equate God with any one culture or political ideal. It is quite wrong to require allegiance to any of them as evidence of allegiance to Him.[7]

The notion of loyalty, particularly evident in Protestant culture in Northern Ireland, is thus pivotal to the development of an ethic for churches seeking to bear effective and transformative witness in a contested space. As a dynamic notion, loyalty to anything other than God is challenged on the basis of idolatry and its dynamism is opened up through the theological ideas of sanctification and covenant.

The adducing of particular times in Irish Presbyterian history as a conversation partner in the discussion will be explained, and so also, the importance of scriptural discourse emphasized throughout. The possibility of a threefold framework to inform the discussion within the thesis will be examined - the framework consisting of rootedness, hermeneutical awareness and openness. Rootedness will be explored in relation to Scripture, the life of the church and the community of faith and the Church will be challenged to understand itself as a community of interpreters requiring hermeneutical awareness. Hermeneutical awareness will be proposed as a key theme for churches in examining the notion of openness, particularly in light of the centrality of scripture. The Church as the community of interpreters, therefore, will be invited to be open to examining the dynamics of scripture and the application of its teaching, especially in situations where societies are divided and space contested.

As community is a significant idea, Chapter Two will take up the question of belonging as an aspect of the rootedness of the Church and will examine the expression of belonging to God in terms of loyalty to God. Loyalty to God above all other

gods will be affirmed as a hermeneutical principle, assisting the Christian community in the process of explicating what belonging to God means and how it impacts upon ethical living. Loyalty to God is examined as an adjudicating principle where loyalties are contested and faithfulness to God challenged in situations where other loyalties assume the posture and claims of a religion. The challenge of a static notion of loyalty, in which staying with one's own kind becomes more important than openness to others, is countered with the idea of conversion. Conversion, it will be argued, enables churches to espouse change as a means of developing ever-deepening faithfulness to God. This is acknowledged as being a challenge which the Christian community has faced from the earliest days. As Fergusson notes,

> [t]he early Christians were taught that their highest loyalty was to Christ and therefore to the church rather than the state or any other institution.[8]

In Irish Presbyterian history the involvement of some Presbyterians in the United Irish Rebellion of 1798 illustrates the dynamics of loyalty to God in relation to lesser loyalties. Not all Presbyterians were in favour of the Rebellion, yet none were excluded from the church on the basis of political opinion or involvement. Reflection on the contributions of two Presbyterian protagonists, Rev. James Porter and Rev. William Steel Dickson, to the United Irish cause, and their experiences within the Presbyterian Church at that time, will be examined to consider if divided political loyalties can exist alongside one another, within the same denomination, as relativized loyalties and without compromise to divine sovereignty.

In living allegiance to God the churches find themselves in a world of cross-currents and agreements, where their own hermeneutical assumptions need to be interrogated and cultural

alignments acknowledged as the potential arena of God's grace. As the arena of God's grace, the Church, it will be argued, need not separate itself from the world but rather engage with the world in the process of reforming or relativizing all loyalties to loyalty to God.

Chapter Three will take up the question of hermeneutical boundaries in relation to the Church's seeking to live in fidelity to God. Theologically this may be understood as the process of sanctification. For those seeking sanctification, the transformation of their lives to reflect the life of Christ, one of the greatest pitfalls is of moving away from, rather than towards, God. In order to restrain wanton movement away from God, the churches have set boundaries beyond which change cannot be countenanced. These boundaries are interpretations of scripture found in the creeds and confessions of the Church, and they function as boundary markers to keep the Church oriented towards God who is at the centre, in faithfulness to the teaching of scripture. Chapter Three therefore examines the function of boundaries and the corresponding breadth of hermeneutical space. It will be affirmed that, as a hermeneutical community, the Church is confronted with the challenge of providing a bridge between its teaching and the world.

Chapter Three pays particular attention to the function of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in the history of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Historically, the *Westminster Confession*, while adopted as a Confessional Standard, did not always play the significant role that it did subsequently, especially since the resolution of the subscription controversies in 1835. Up until that time the practice of subscription, that is of formal acknowledgement by elders and ministers, had been erratic and tended to vary from place to place. However, a specific disagreement about the doctrine of the Trinity led non-

subscribers to leave the General Synod of Ulster in 1835 to form the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster. While it took some time for the matter finally to be laid to rest, formal subscription has been the practice of Irish Presbyterians ever since. A critical exploration of this period in Irish Presbyterian history enables reflection on the practice of boundary marking - its importance and significance - and the consequences for a denomination when boundaries are traversed.

It is clear that churches do not all share the same interpretive standards as their boundary markers. If there is a question about Church and world encountering one another in their difference, then there is also a question about how different denominations encounter one another. Chapter Four will therefore turn to the issue of denominational relationships, further developing the dialogical model for conversion and transformation with regard to those relationships. The idea of unity will be examined with allusion to the history of the World Council of Churches, contending that unity, as a contested idea, need not be something to be resisted. Reflecting on the life and work of the WCC, it will be argued that, while the very notion of unity is itself a contested idea, the dynamics of the process of negotiating unity contribute to the Church's conversion. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion will be addressed in the exploration of how churches are to live and witness to loyalty to God above all other loyalties.

Precisely because there are different models of unity available, denominations can adopt models of relationship which accommodate their concerns, while enabling dialogue with one another. For the churches, failure to engage with one another on the basis that the search for unity will compromise them is not a sufficient argument for failing to build interdenominational relationships. This failure is further compounded by the divided context in which churches find

themselves in contested societies, and gives credence to the belief that the churches are no more trustworthy than other institutions and have nothing to offer. What is at stake is the faithful and effective witness of the churches and their ability to contribute to the transformation of church and world. It will be argued that failed relationships between the denominations, failed *koinonia*, affects the witness of the Church, by contrast, while living unity with respect for difference is an opportunity to sustain the integrity of denominations, while moving in and out of the hermeneutical space of others. This, it will be maintained, is linked to the Christian imperative of conversion.

My time as a minister within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland began with years during which this denomination was marked by its withdrawal from formal encounter with other denominations. Withdrawal from the World Council of Churches had taken place before I was ordained but it is a living memory for me as I was present at the General Assembly the day the decision was taken. The challenge to build denominational relationships in the face of an experienced history of dismantling those relationships is sharp. The historical section of this chapter sets out to explore the dynamics of separation and to seek for dynamics of inclusion and union within the denomination. The dynamic for union can, in fact, be clearly seen at the time when the General Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod united to form the General Assembly in 1840. More recent history is explored with regard to Presbyterian relationships with other denominations in Ireland and the world in an attempt to discover irenic dynamics which may have been repressed. This exploration will consider whether or not the contested nature of unity is taken seriously by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and if not, will ask how helpful it would be to consider the notion of unity in such ways. This historical conversation is an investigation into the

possibilities of openness from a more hermeneutically sensitive position than is perhaps customary.

Chapter Five will take into account the discussions of the previous chapters and propose an ethic drawn, firstly, from the notion of rootedness in one's own tradition and the broad tradition of the Church. A sense of rootedness will be examined as that which sustains the Church as it engages with those who are different. Hermeneutical awareness, having been proposed as a necessary response to the need to witness within the context in which any church finds itself, is a means of bearing Christian witness while also taking account of concerns about truth, by recognizing the importance of boundary markers. Openness, having been proposed as a necessary aspect in the process of conversion and transformation, is affirmed as a possibility even for those who find interdenominational relationships difficult. That unity can be a contested idea enables denominational loyalty to be maintained but at the same time challenged and strengthened by encounter with others.

Chapter Five therefore proposes an ethic which accepts that agreement is not always possible before engagement and so situates the process of achieving agreements within the process itself. Agreements are identified as a desirable commonality which is not a prerequisite to engagement. The second aspect of the proposed ethic is developed in order to take account of the Church's concern for truth and for faithfulness, and is drawn from philosophical discussion regarding the generalized other, in the work of Habermas, and the concrete other, in the work of Seyla Benhabib. Taking the concerns for truth and faithfulness into account, the ethic proposes that it is concrete others who have to be accepted in the dialogical process, others with specific experiences, concerns and beliefs, rather than representative others. That is to say, everyone comes to the engagement free to be themselves and to assert their own

positions, although not in a manner that is arrogant or tending to separation. The third aspect of the ethic draws on theology, specifically eschatology, to assist the churches to accept that they live in a world in which there are many moral dilemmas and disagreements must be sensitively negotiated. Eschatologically the Church accepts that perfection is not an experience guaranteed in this life, and so provisional goals can be accepted while greater goals are aspired to.

It will be asserted that this three-fold ethic – commonality within the process, acceptance of others, and acceptance of provisional goals – is sustained theologically by biblical ideas about conversion and reconciliation. Concerns regarding maintaining the distinctiveness of the Christian message and relativism are addressed. The Church will be challenged to genuinely be *ecclesia semper reformanda*, adopting the three-fold ethic to inform engagement with the world and the search for the conversion of both world and Church. The ethic is proposed as a means of moving the Church from disengaged concern about what is happening in the public realm, to dialogue, in the hope of reaching reconciliation among divided people, and specifically within the Northern Irish context. The value of loyalty to God above all other loyalties as an adjudicating principle within the proposed ethic for engagement will also be assessed.

In this thesis the themes of crisis and conversion will be brought together in search of an ethic that is biblically and theologically grounded, which can contribute to the churches' involvement in a society caught in a cycle of violence and separation. It is a challenge to churches to effectively engage with their context, bearing witness in a manner that contributes, under the power of the Spirit, to the transformation of world and church. I am convinced that if the Church cannot specifically address its context then it cannot faithfully bear

witness to the gospel and to the God to whom it seeks to be converted. This thesis will be, therefore, an exploration of a possible ethic that enables both Church and world to experience conversion to God.

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[1] James Newton Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) p187.
[2] Wilfred Owen, *O World Of Many Worlds* John Stallworthy ed., *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) p48.
[3] Gillian Evans expresses five requirements for ecumenical conversation – respect for the others engaged in the conversation, a willingness to admit when you have been wrong or prejudiced, a commitment to developing selflessness, the setting aside of desire for personal credit, and a willingness to be at the disposal of others. These Evans explicates as principles of rapprochement. G. R. Evans, *Method in Ecumenical Theology: The lessons so far* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996) P72ff.
[4] "A new stage is reached when each side tries not only to put is own case and to understand where the other's sensitivities lie, but to accept as much as is possible for it to do of the other side's faith as its own." Ibid. p86.
[5] "The next stage is admitting that there may be, or have been in the past, fault on one's own side." Ibid. p86.
[6] The membership of *An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics* is representative of the variety of reflective strands in the Irish context. Protestants and Roman Catholics, women and men, clergy and lay, representatives from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, belong to the group. They have persisted in offering to the Northern Irish situation, an alternative way of living and speaking as Church. The approaches arrived at by the group are constantly informed by an intra-group dialogue, dealing with theological and political differences, but willing to deal with the issues together. This dialogical approach offers an alternative, ecumenical way of reflecting on a divided society.
[7] *For God and His Glory Alone: A Contribution relating some Biblical Principles to the Situation in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland, 1988) p9.
[8] David Fergusson, *Community, liberalism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p78.

CHAPTER ONE

PRINCIPLES AND PARAMETERS:

Clearing the ground and sign-posting the way

1. Setting the scene: Key themes and understandings

1.1 The Church in its context

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the key themes that recur throughout this thesis and to explore their meaning and definition as applied within this thesis. For the purposes of this thesis it is important to also provide brief background to the informing themes, specifically from within the Reformed tradition. Foundational to the thesis is the belief that the Church cannot and should not be divorced from its place in time and history. The Church, as ethical community, is called to witness in the time and place in which it finds itself; the purpose of this thesis is to develop an ethic that may inform the churches as they live within their time and place. Hence the witness of the church in any time or place requires an awareness of the church's local context together with its synchronic context.[1] The calling of the Church, therefore, is to be a witness to the Gospel in the world. This will be examined in section 3.1.

An awareness of the Church in its synchronic context alone is insufficient. The Church does not arrive in any time or place as an unshaped entity but is already shaped by its history and traditions. Within its synchronic context, therefore, the church is shaped by its history and traditions, its diachronic context, and together synchronic and diachronic root the church in any given time and place, in a local context. A sense of the diachronic context, and of what each church tradition brings to its synchronic context, raises questions about what view of history may be taken as valid in the examination of the traditions influencing the Church and each of the churches. For the Reformed churches, the elevated memory of the Reformation helps

define the key issues. Aspects of history before and after the Reformation may be overlooked but if retrieved into the living memory of the church may have significant reforming effects. The view of history and the hermeneutical approach to it as employed in this thesis will be examined in section 3.2. However, some definition of the Church is essential if context is to be considered and so we now turn to the question of what the Church is.

1.2 What is the Church?

To ask what the Church is, is to raise the issue of the identity of the Church. In 1981 Donald Guthrie, a well known writer within the Evangelical tradition, acknowledged that, '[t]he ecumenical movement has stirred up renewed questioning about the nature of the church.'[2] Guthrie considers the identity of the church from the perspective of Jesus and the community he intended to form. From the notion of the kingdom, Guthrie brings the challenge that if kingdom and the community which Christ intended to form are disassociated from the Church, then individualism dominates. The church's identity may, therefore, be defined as the community of God's people.[3] The gospel of John particularly points to that community as being a community of mission, gathering God's scattered people into one.[4]

To become aware of diachronic and synchronic influences on the churches is the beginning of an attempt to enable the churches to break from what may have become fixated images. Those selective images include that of the Church as the body of Christ,[5] the bride of Christ,[6] a building,[7] and the true people of God.[8] While it is essential to keep biblical images before the Church, to do so without critical reflection on what other influences have shaped and are shaping the Church, is to be hermeneutically unaware. The result is a limited ability to be self-reflective and a limited ability to become what the Church aspires to be as

community. Influences affecting interpretation of the biblical images can be social, political, economic or theological. The identity of the church will be explored more fully in Chapter Two. Here it is important to note that matters of identity are complex and wide ranging and that the churches need to develop hermeneutical awareness in order to understand themselves as the community of God's people in any given time and place. The foundations and parameters of the notion of identity need, therefore, to be established for the conversation of this thesis to take place. These will be examined in section 2.2.

While there are many possible views of what the purpose of the Church is, there is the need to set out a particular understanding of the church in the world which will influence and shape the argument of this thesis. This understanding of the Church is closely connected to the idea of mission. Mission is upheld not only as a matter of proclaiming or telling, but as a matter of lifestyle, witness or ethical living which embody the values of the kingdom, and this is the purpose of the Church. This will be explicated in section 2.1. Scripture, the key documents for the Church, is critical in the life and witness of the church and so a scriptural discourse will be central throughout this thesis.

1.3 Scriptural discourse as essential

Foundational to understanding what the Church is and what its purpose is, is Scripture. Scripture is, therefore, crucial in the development of a Christian ethic and to inform ethical living. The Reformed emphasis on *sola scriptura*[9] renders scriptural discourse all the more essential. In the development of an ethic to inform the Church, scripture has to be researched and applied to lifestyle. For those in the Reformed tradition, and indeed for the churches where the centrality of scripture is vitally important, the search for scriptural teaching and insight is crucial. Throughout the thesis there is a recurrent scriptural

discourse to both challenge and represent the Reformed tradition. This scriptural discourse also sets the Reformed tradition, in the denominational and historical sense, within the broader Tradition of the Church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The reasons for employing a critical scriptural discourse will be set out more explicitly in section 4.1.

1.4 An ecumenical methodology

All the issues raised in this thesis are encountered by the author's deeply held conviction that there is value in reflecting theologically. I will constantly return to theological themes. Those themes arise from my 'embeddedness' within the Reformed tradition but are critiqued by my view of history, which reveals the need to be aware that whatever is dominant within a tradition[10] may not be all that there is to that tradition. Some important themes may have become suppressed or forgotten; others may have become over-emphasised.[11] How history is appropriated and understood is developed in section 3.2. A broader methodology, enabling conversation between traditions, contexts, and history, will be set out in section 4.3 and may be described as ecumenical.

1.5 Discursive themes in the conversation

As this thesis employs an ecumenical methodology, it is important to return to the conversation between the churches as well as to the conversation between Church and world. As a matter of practice, therefore, I will take representative strands from different theological traditions to enter the debate and assist in developing an ethic for the churches. The ethic will then emerge as being biblically and theologically informed and drawing on the wisdom of the Reformed, the Evangelical and the Catholic traditions. To these will be added a strand of ecumenical reflection and praxis represented by *An Inter-Church Group on Faith and*

Politics (henceforth, The Faith and Politics Group).[12] The different strands of thought brought to bear on the conversation will be identified and described in section 3.3. The bringing together of these strands is to employ the proposed ecumenical methodology.

Before any of these traditions can be brought to bear we return to the matter of the church's identity, asking what it is that shapes churches, and also what limits are set upon the discussion by the identity debate, which has become so prominent in recent decades. While there are issues relating to the identity of the 'Church' as the whole body of Christ in every place, it is also the case that there are denominational identities within that broad identity. This denominational identity is, therefore, of the 'church'. Discussion of identity must take account of the interaction and intersections between the identity of the Church and the identity of church as churches.

2. The Purpose of the Church: Mission and self-understanding

2.1 The Church and mission

From the formal inception of the WCC in 1948, mission has been a key theme and emphasis. That emphasis was drawn particularly from the days of the International Missionary Council meeting in Edinburgh in its World Missionary Conference in 1910. The International Missionary Council became institutionally part of the WCC in 1961 and continues to inform the ecumenical movement. The commitment to ecumenism as a commitment to mission has often been obscured, both within the WCC and outside of it, with a concern about what unity means. In my own Irish Presbyterian tradition, for example, ecumenism has raised concerns about compromise in the search for unity, with little reference being made to counter that concern in terms of the ecumenical commitment to

mission. These concerns have brought discussion about unity, and not mission, into the foreground. The fact that:

> [t]he first effective initiatives leading to ecumenical co-operation had been taken by the missionary movement and had inspired the pioneers of co-operation between the churches,[13]

is largely obscured in such discourse and the positive impulse for mission lost when concerns about unity dominate in this one-sided way. Not only has the connection between unity and mission been obscured but at times each may even have been perceived to be two separate enterprises, 'often seen and treated in isolation from one another.'[14] Robin Boyd, ordained in the Irish Presbyterian Church and subsequently a member of the Church of South India and of the Uniting Church of Australia, reflecting on the goals of the ecumenical movement, is critical of what he defines as 'ecumenical myopia'. Boyd has taken the movement to task for the kind of short-sightedness which excludes mission from the ecumenical vision and argues that the biblical material links unity and mission. The argument is equally pertinent to those critics who mistakenly focus the purpose of the ecumenical movement on unity rather than mission. Boyd argues that unity is a stage on the way and not the ultimate destination of the ecumenical movement. For Boyd, '[u]nity is essential, but it is penultimate: the ultimate goal is the world's acceptance of the good news of Christ's Kingdom.'[15]

This separation of unity and mission was addressed by The Faith and Order Commission at its Budapest meeting, 1989. A draft study paper resulting from work done following the 1982 Faith and Order Lima Statement, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,* was presented. Members of the Commission came to Budapest with renewed energy and confidence, believing the polarity between mission and

unity to have been greatly lessened.[16] In his reflection on the process up to Budapest, Paul Crow Jr. emphasised the linkage between what the church believes and what it does, between faith and mission:

> We are not just about 'social analysis' but are striving for an authentic relationship between the church's faith and mission, between the gospel and the church's essential presence in the world as sign and foretaste of the liberating and reconciling power of God.[17]

The WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), San Antonio, Texas 1989, reflects a similar double focus in its message. It upheld the broad mission of the church in its cultural, diverse, and multifaceted aspects as understood in the world at that time:

> The two most significant trends in this Conference were
> the spirit of universality (catholicity) of the gathering,
> and its concern for the fullness of the gospel, namely:
> to hold in creative tension
> spiritual and material needs,
> prayer and action,
> evangelism and social responsibility,
> dialogue and witness,
> power and vulnerability,
> local and universal.[18]

At San Antonio, 1990, a broad understanding of mission prevailed and it was affirmed that mission is about proclamation of God's love, but also about solidarity with the suffering and the just sharing of the earth's resources. Mission was, therefore, set at the heart of communities of faith.[19] The San Antonio Conference declared to the WCC the urgent need for churches everywhere to understand themselves as being in missionary situations.[20] To go the

way of Christ would mean, it was argued, churches joining their actions wherever possible:

> Christian mission is the humble involvement of one body of Christ in liberating and suffering love, the witness of God's saving acts in Christ, and the practice of God's incarnational love for all humankind.[21]

For the purposes of this thesis mission is taken seriously as the key dynamic necessary for bearing effective witness to the gospel in today's world, while at the same time examining what implications there are for the search for unity. The task is challenging given the polarisation which already exists between understandings of mission and unity. Where the two are connected suspicions are aroused that the mission claim is a ruse towards imposing a unity which is too compromised to be valuable. Equally, where unity in mission work is upheld there may be a subsequent devaluing of mission work done on a confessionally-inspired basis. Therefore, this thesis will, in particular, attempt to take seriously difficulties which the notion of unity has frequently raised in the Irish Presbyterian context, given that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (*henceforth, PCI*) exists in a fragmented, divided and conflicted context. From these ecclesiological understandings and with situations of ethnic conflict and competition in mind, I will seek to develop an ethic for the churches that can inform and direct their mission. The ethic, if it is to be ecumenically serious, will have to address matters of shared witness and working with others. To be credible it will equally have to address concerns about a compromised unity which violates the integrity of scripture. Inevitably this will lead to consideration of matters of identity, specifically issues of shared identity and renegotiable or transforming identity. These will be examined more specifically in Chapter Two but some

preliminary considerations regarding identity will be developed in section 2.3. In the following section some consideration will be given to how mission is understood, different models that can be adopted and the model adopted in this thesis.

2.2 Proclamation, dialogue and mission

The ecumenical movement's missionary impetus, often overlooked by its critics, challenges the churches to reflect on the dynamics influencing their mission in the world.[22] Some evangelicals, for instance, believing that Jesus Christ is the only way, opt for a proclamatory model, as opposed to a dialogical model, for mission. Their stance is made clear in their persistent challenges to WCC thinking on how Christians should relate to people of other faiths.[23] Evangelicals of an exclusivist kind feel it incumbent upon them to proclaim the gospel. This evangelical understanding is expressed in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (hereafter *The Westminster Confession).*

> Works done by unregenerate men, although, for the matter of them, they may be things which God commands, and of good use both to themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful, and displeasing unto God.[24]

Taking a firm view on the uniqueness of Christianity, Hendrik Kraemer, the Dutch missiologist, prepared papers for the International Missionary Conference at Tambaram, 1938, in which he argued that,

> [t]he question of truth is particularly urgent for the missionary cause, because missions must inevitably lose their vital impetus if this conviction becomes

> thin or turns out to be invalid, or is held with an uneasy conscience or a confused intellect.[25]

For Kraemer, the core issue in mission was one of truth that cannot be compromised. He affirmed God as revealed in Christ and the only encounter between Christianity and other faiths as a missionary encounter, by which can be meant preparation for evangelism.[26] When encounter with others is affirmed as evangelistic, elements of exclusivism creep in to affirmations of uniqueness and there is a shift in the dynamic of mission towards proclamation, which takes little account of the other's position or belief.

Kraemer's emphasis on Christianity as the only way has been an exemplary touchstone in evangelical thinking. Evangelicals, concerned about shifts towards dialogue as a valid forum for mission, began to meet regularly under the leadership of the North American Evangelist, Billy Graham. They met first in Berlin, 1966, but perhaps the most influential of these conferences was held in Lausanne, 1974. The resultant *Lausanne Covenant* expressed evangelical concerns and affirmed that there is only one Gospel. God, by implication, is found only within Christianity. It therefore remains the task of the Church to proclaim the gospel.

> We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one Gospel, although there is a wide variety of evangelistic approaches. We recognise that all men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth in their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies.[27]

A self-understanding that limits God and truth to one group of people, in this case evangelicals, supports a

proclamatory, exclusivist model for mission. There are, however, consequences to holding an exclusivist view, consequences which affect the Church's witness in the world. Difficulties with an exclusivism that seeks only to declare the gospel, even if superiority is condemned, are further compounded by connections with colonialism. Missionaries transplanted Western practices in cultures that found such practices alien. Music, dress, worship style, to name but a few, reflected Western forms of Christianity more than Christianity itself.

The extent to which some people felt the effects of a model for mission which was proclamatory rather than dialogical, particularly in cultures where other faiths were predominant, is shown in the plea of the Kenyan ecumenist John Gatu who called, in 1971, for a *moratorium* on 'foreign missions.' This plea was voiced again at the Third Assembly of the All Africa Council of Churches in 1974.

> Thus, as a matter of policy, and as the most viable means of giving the African Church the power to perform its mission in the African context, as well as to lead our governments and peoples in finding solutions to the economic and social dependency, our option has to be a *moratorium* on the receiving of money and personnel.[28]

A false connection between gospel and culture implied the superiority of one, in this case North American and European culture, and the inferiority of others. When peoples began to assert their own cultural identity as valid they justifiably were tempted to shake off Christianity along with Western culture. Evangelicals have been aware of the effects of implying a false connection between gospel and culture, as evidenced in the work of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.[29]

That a people should feel so deeply alienated from missionaries who came to share the gospel is challenge to

the Western Church. Exclusivism, when so blatantly bound up with culture, shores up a sense of cultural superiority that hinders the goal of winning souls for Christ. It points to a question that is specifically at issue in the development of an ethic for the churches – how to hold to belief in the uniqueness of Christianity in a way which does not lead to cultural or theological superiority. This theme will recur throughout the thesis as I attempt to take uniqueness seriously but resist the pull towards superiority, arrogance or separation. PCI's special meeting of the General Assembly in 1990 to mark its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary (see Appendix A – *The Coleraine Declaration*), affirmed the need for Presbyterians to be at work in mission addressing a variety of issues, among a variety of people and thus resisting any tendency to separation or arrogance:

> The task of mission involves both the proclamation of the gospel of salvation, and the demonstration of the love of God through the works of the Kingdom. Evangelism and social concern are linked together inextricably in the purpose of God. We affirm the wide-ranging concerns in which we have been and still are involved. We are determined to work with other Christians as salt and light in contemporary society, challenging injustice, and offering compassion and help to people in their needs.[30]

Theologically speaking, one of the greatest fears of a dialogical approach to mission is that truth will be compromised and souls lost. Holding the fine line between uniqueness and exclusivism has proved difficult, not least because of the complexity of the dynamics of exclusivism. It is crucial that this question be addressed out of a concern for the world, and for the integrity of the Church as Christ intended it to be. Exclusivism and dynamics that tend towards exclusivism are particularly relevant in situations where there is ethnic competition, where identities compete

with one another, sometimes to the point of violent conflict. Understanding the broad scope of concerns and interests that shape identity and examine how that identity is lived in relation to others.

2.3 The identity debate

The identity debate is broad and multifaceted, taking on greater significance since 1989 and the fall of the Berlin wall. The emerging revelation after 1989 was that the Soviet Bloc was not as unified as its public image had portrayed. Those peoples in countries within the USSR remained peoples of national and ethnic cultures with their own particular identities.[31] What followed 1989 was the change and reform of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, but issues of independence were also significant. Wars, declarations of independence, loyalties to national histories, ensured that, 'the cohesion provided by the Soviet Union began to fray'.[32] From the former USSR, conflict spilled over into Eastern Europe. In Czechoslovakia the result was a peaceful division into Czech Republic and Slovakia, but in Yugoslavia, an area of six Republics, two autonomous regions and several ethnic groups, the situation was far from peaceful. Serbs and Croats engaged in conflict of a kind that shocked Europe and the world and included human rights violations such as detention camps and mass killings.

To this litany of conflict an increasingly aware world added knowledge of Rwanda and the impact of its Hutu-Tutsi conflict on Burundi and Zaire, and of many more zones of violent conflict.[33] Ethnic conflict and terrorism rose to unprecedented levels, bringing the issue of identity to the fore with an urgent call to understand why it is that groups become set against one another, despite perhaps years of relatively contented living alongside one another. The facts have made the issue one for ongoing and urgent attention. In Volkan's words:

> Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost in ethnic conflict and related large-group conflicts during this decade ... many of these conflicts have taken place within the boundaries of a single country; they are considered ethnic, religious and cultural large-group identity-related conflicts, not national conflicts between sovereign countries.[34]

While it is the case that identity and identity relationships have been thrust into the spotlight because of historical circumstances since 1989, it is also the case that there is a long history of attempting to understand the complex relationships between identities, individual and group. In some cases identity has been linked with nations and the two may, from time to time, be coterminous. But the learning since 1989 is that the criteria affecting identity and identity relationships are complex and subjective and include historical, cultural and religious dynamics. How individual identities are shaped is a debatable concern for Anthony Giddens. He is not prepared to give the ground to external circumstance alone, arguing that,

> [t]he self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; in forging their self-identities, no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications.[35]

Clearly, then, the identity debate has demonstrated the centrality of psychological and sociological dimensions. With the rise of ethnic conflict, trust and risk have become important themes which demonstrably affect individual and societal developments and relationships between groups. An inability to relate well can result in isolation, conflict, a sense of meaninglessness or anxiety. In order to deal with these there is a need to create a self-identity which brings meaning and hope. This is done using systems of organisation through which experience is mediated and

invested with purpose and meaning. If it is not possible to engage with such a system, or if such systems become depersonalised organisations, then further and deeper anxiety results for those who do not relate well and already feel isolated. Relationships with others are disturbed when others are perceived to be less anxious, to have better systems, when others are perceived to have the intention to hi-jack, dominate or take over the meagre systems of those who are already anxious. So a relationship of threat, fear and alienation grows and may develop into competition and open, violent conflict. All these factors have made the notion of identity crucial in a new way.

The focus of identity within this thesis is to examine how it functions and may be understood in situations where there is ethnic competition and conflict. The process is to examine identity, and in particular the dynamics of trust, risk, encounter with others and dealing with difference. The external influences at work in shaping identity in the Northern Irish context are relevant but will be examined also in the light of theological reflection, with special reference to scripture and the role of the churches in Northern Ireland. The concern will always be to maintain individual or group integrity, in other words particularity, but at the same time to seek ways to build community.

I will define this more carefully in the following section, but want here to acknowledge the spectrum of the identity debate from its two poles of community and individual. The moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, takes a view of identity as being formed and found within community. He writes,

> ... the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighbourhood, the city and the tribe ...[36]

MacIntyre thus affirms the community and relational aspect of identity that will clearly be open to change, as individuals re-situate themselves among different groups, take on different experiences, and develop in their approach to their social milieu. The individual self does not, however, in MacIntyre's view, entirely give itself up to its social situation but retains some autonomy and ability to make choices. He expresses this in terms of the non-acceptance of the moral limitations of the community to which the individual belongs. So the moral identity of the self in membership of community or communities, 'does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community.'[37]

MacIntyre acknowledges that particularities cannot be left behind completely but in the search for the communitarian 'good life' he argues that they must be moved on from, and the desire to equate those particularities, however partial, with the universal has to be resisted. As a communitarian, MacIntyre holds to the belief that identity is situated within communities and may be open to change.

Charles Taylor, on the other hand, holds to the view that the individual takes central position.[38] For Taylor matters of what makes life worth living, issues of justice, respect and dignity have always to be coupled with notions of a full life. In Western culture these matters have become focused in the debate about human rights.[39] Taylor expresses the individual's centrality to that debate in terms of autonomy.[40] The autonomous self is found within societies or communities in which they are to express their identity as individuals, holding together their own desire for respect for others with that of the desire for a full life. These moral ideas shape the individual's identity. While Taylor does not deny the possibility of changing identity, he, more firmly than MacIntyre, emphasises loyalty to one's

personal identity as, 'something that one ought to be true to, can fail to uphold, can surrender when one ought to.'[41]

For Taylor, identity is a guiding light for the individual, while for MacIntyre it is to be found within, and may not be limited by, community. MacIntyre and Taylor expose the complexities of the debate. In the development of a Christian ethic, Robert Gascoigne acknowledges both commonality and particularity as key issues emphasising the importance of these matters of identity, while doing justice to their complexity. He argues that what is at stake in the development of an ethic for Christian living in a divided world is seen in the relationship between universality, or commonality, and particularity.[42]

The debate regarding individual and community significance will be important in the final chapter in clarifying and defining an ethic for the churches. It is not the intention of this thesis to examine the identity debate in detail. However, it is important to draw from that debate the insights which can be focused to develop an ethic for the churches. This ethic must contribute towards effective peacemaking and conflict-resolving mission, specifically issues of particularity and universality as they relate to the possibilities of making peace. The role of the churches, their significance for the future of Northern Ireland, and the importance of an ethic to inform their actions, cannot be underestimated. Duncan Morrow, Chief Executive Officer of the Community Relations Council, underlines this when he acknowledges that,

> ...whether one approaches learning about conflict and steps beyond conflict in Northern Ireland as a citizen, a sociologist, a politician, a cleric, a journalist or a soldier, what churches do, did and will do to make peace matters.[43]

Particularity, universality, and peacemaking are taken up in the work of the Jewish scholar, Marc Gopin, who includes Northern Ireland in the scope of his analysis.

2.4 Identity, uniqueness and integration

Marc Gopin elucidates the identity debate in his consideration of two basic human needs – the need for integration and the need for uniqueness. He argues that if attempts are made to meld these basic needs then the result can be catastrophic, evidenced in the desire to conquer ideological systems.[44] However, Gopin argues that,

> ... those religious people who discover a balance between the two needs, the need for integration or merging and the need for distinctive identity, are the ones who negotiate their religiosity in the most peaceful ways.[45]

From Gopin's work it is clear that the ability to maintain a sense of one's own uniqueness and yet to be able to enter other worlds of meaning without feeling one's own uniqueness to be under threat, develops the kind of religion that is committed to peacemaking. Insights arising from considerations of identity set out the parameters of the challenge to know uniqueness and merging, to know ourselves as individuals and members of communities, to know both particularity and universality, accepting the impact social context has on self-understanding, or self-identity. If it is the case that identity is private or individual then there is a greater risk that it could be thought of as being unchangeable, not part of the social process of encounter with others and their identities. In this sense, identity becomes something to be protected. Encounter with the identities of others, finding ways to live peaceably with them, and to share one's own identity with them, is the challenge of developing a Christian ethic in a divided society. The issue of the identity of the church will be taken

up in Chapter Two. Here it is important to note what has been learned by the discipline of social anthropology, that,

> ... aspects of the person which have conventionally been held to be unchangeable, inner and private, may fruitfully be studied as symbolic aspects of social processes.[46]

This brings us to one of the key themes of this thesis – the notion of loyalty and its impact on political aspiration and good neighbourliness. Loyalty will be a key theme in offering a critique of the life and witness of the churches in situations of ethnic competition.

2.5 Loyalty in situations of cultural competition

In situations of cultural competition and conflict, loyalty to one's own is a means by which competition and conflict persist. Loyalty to one's own may also lead to living only among one's own. In Northern Ireland, since the ceasefires and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, there has been no significant move away from living among one's own. Recent events in country towns such as Ahoghill, Carrickfergus and Ballymena suggest a tendency to purify areas to the extent where those who are different are threatened to the point of leaving their homes. Living among one's own has serious consequences for making peace, as recognised by Frank Wright who lectured in political science at Queen's University, Belfast.

> Once degeneration into territorial breakdown has occurred, it is exceedingly difficult to restore any kind of peaceful co-existence between territorial fragments.[47]

The importance of loyalty to one's own is also dependent on a view of identity as individual and private. To break the spiral of conflict, this loyalty to one's own has to be tested in encounter with others. However, some

situations may be so dangerous, or so dominated by a sense of threat and fear, that a higher loyalty can be drawn into the debate enabling the identification of common ground as a place for encounter. A 'higher' loyalty is one which may include those from all other loyalties inviting them to new places of belonging and a new sense of commonality. In this way, encounter with others becomes a less risky business.

In the Northern Irish context, the recognition of a higher loyalty has been liberating for the Christian community seeking to find ways of breaking the spiral of violence. As the conflict has persisted among peoples who separately take the name, 'Christian', that higher loyalty defining and expressing common ground, can be sought from within the Christian faith tradition.

A stable sense of safety is important as the encounter occurs and this identification of a loyalty which overarches political loyalty protects the communities and individuals that encounter one another from the impacts of being branded as betrayers. To betray one's own is to leave oneself with no place of belonging and to become vulnerable, which in Northern Ireland has meant punishment shootings and beatings, being tarred and feathered, and exiled. In some instances, those who have betrayed their own have been murdered by their own. So the sense of being vulnerable is real and not to be lightly ignored. While there may still be accusations of betrayal made against Christians who are prepared to encounter one another and listen to the other's political aspirations and experiences, the edge is taken off the accusation by a sense of responding to a common and higher Christian vocation.[48] This has been expressed similarly by the WCC's Faith and Order Commission at its plenary meeting in 2004:

> How can the church implement the Pauline injunction to 'receive one another as Christ has received you…' (Rom. 15:7) in a manner that would affect global trends, in face of today's fanatical tendencies to sharpen ethnic and national identities in ways that act to the contrary?[49]

The Faith and Order Commission's paper identifies the need for churches to reflect self-critically on their role in a divided world by asking themselves how to implement the teaching of scripture. Overarching loyalty is to God and is a loyalty which relativizes all other loyalties, ethnic and national, subjecting them to scrutiny. In his discourse on the Church and its relationship to civil authorities, Calvin espouses the notion that loyalty to God should take precedence over other loyalties. He describes the community of God's people as being 'subject only to the Lord', implying a response such as only loyal subjects make.[50] From this it may be deduced that, in Calvin's view, any authority demanding a loyalty from God's people which would challenge God's place among them, is to be resisted. For, as Calvin wrote,

> …we are redeemed by Christ at the great price which our redemption cost him, in order that we might not yield a slavish obedience to the depraved wishes of men, far less do homage to their impiety.[51]

This notion of loyalty is rooted in the theological understanding of God as transcendent and in the biblical notion of the kingdom of God. In Calvin's theological exposition, and therefore in the Reformed tradition, God's absolute transcendence and otherness is primary. François Wendel notes that,

> [f]rom the beginning of his work, Calvin places all his theology under the sign of what was one of the essential principles of the Reformation: the absolute transcendence of God.[52]

The transcendence of God has implications for Christians and their expressed loyalties. As there is no one and nothing greater than God then there is no one and nothing to whom allegiance is more certainly owed. If any political loyalty calls from Christians an allegiance that more clearly shapes thinking and behaviour than loyal relationship to God, then God's transcendence is called into question. From the Reformed tradition then, the transcendence of God theologically underpins and critiques other loyalties, challenging the Christian community to take care not to establish gods who occupy the place of the one, transcendent God.

The transcendence of God is such as to inspire ultimate obedience in God's followers which, I contend, can be construed as a sense of loyalty, particularly in situations of cultural contention and conflict where loyalties are demanded and inspired by the tribal gods of political aspiration and cultural allegiance. Of obedience to God, Calvin writes:

> For, until men feel that they owe everything to God, that they are cherished by his paternal care, and that he is the author of all their blessings, so that nought is to be looked for away from him, they will never submit to him in voluntary obedience, nay, unless they place their entire happiness in him, they will never yield up their whole selves to him in truth and sincerity.[53]

Yielding to God alone, as a concern of the Reformers, was seen in the Reformation period in the arguments against what the Reformers understood to be idolatrous practice. However, there is a concern to be recognised with the very notion of loyalty, for loyalty itself may become that to which persons are loyal rather than the one to whom loyalty is lived as expression of relationship. In this way, idolatry can become a concern within the notion of loyalty itself, loyalty becoming what is most

important rather than the God to whom loyalty is owed and lived in dynamic relationship. The idea that loyalty can be idolised needs to be considered if the trap is to be avoided.

2.6 Loyalty or idolatry?

The new emphasis on simplicity in worship buildings during the Reformation represented an attempt to remove anything which would distract the followers of Christ from God. To fix attention on anything other than God was, in their view, idolatry. It was argued that God is the only fit witness to Godself and humanity must resist shaping or forming witnesses to God for themselves.[54] The argument came to be associated with physical images, the corruption being not in the images but in the divine qualities invested in them and the veneration offered to them.[55] It was Calvin's contention, and that of the Reformers, that images led to idolatrous practice which was a matter of affront to the exclusive worship of God and hence to God's transcendence. Thus Calvin writes, 'that unless everything peculiar to divinity is confined to God alone, he is robbed of his honour, and his worship is violated.'[56]

Investing notions of divinity in anything or anyone other than God is, therefore, a challenge to God's transcendence and an expression of loyalty and obedience to that which is not God. Notions of critical and overarching loyalty to God are crucial in places where other loyalties are demanded, as is the case in places such as Northern Ireland. Critical, overarching loyalty to God, as a tool for reflection in such situations is theologically underpinned from within the reformed tradition by the notion of the supremacy of God's transcendence.

However, the notion of a loyalty which relativizes all others must be used carefully as inherent within it are all the dangers of loyalty to that which separates, divides,

excludes or explains away violence against others. The notion must never be cut loose from the theological, biblical and ecumenical foundations upon which it sits. The result would be a theology as exclusive as the exclusive ideologies it claims to resist and challenge. Themes informing the principle of loyalty to God are the work of the following chapter, but it is imperative to acknowledge the dangers inherent within the notion of loyalty, even when it is situated within the Christian tradition.

The work of Josiah Royce,[57] an early twentieth century philosopher and theologian from within the Reformed tradition, is illuminating with regard to loyalty and the danger of its becoming an end in itself and hence an excuse for the domination of others. Royce uses the notion of loyalty ethically as a means of '...establishing a pattern of life that will bring maximum fulfilment to the individual and to the community as a whole.'[58] In Royce's view, human life finds meaning in dedication to causes.[59] It was his belief that the human Self could not be known apart from community in which individuals had freedom to espouse causes, to make choices. Any loyalty, then, could never become dominant as it would constrain the free choice of others. He also acknowledged that not all causes could be considered to be uniformly good. Indeed, some could be destructive to the human community. In response to this difficulty Royce formulated his ethical principle of *loyalty to loyalty:*

> In choosing and in serving the cause to which you are to be loyal, be, in any case, loyal to loyalty.[60]

In other words, if one is loyal to the notion of loyalty the freedom to constrain the loyalties of others must thereby be limited. The notion of loyalty, as Royce demonstrates, needs to be qualified and limited if it is not to run into exclusivist, dominating behaviour. Put in more

biblical terms, if loyalty is not to become an idol then it must be qualified, remain relational and dynamic, and guided by the principles and values discovered in the ongoing study of God. The challenge of this thesis is to take the notion of loyalty, qualify it as relational and dynamic loyalty to God,[61] and expose the inherent dangers, while seeking to develop an ethical principle for living in divided communities that bears radical witness against divisive, exclusivist, dominating or violent behaviour.

Royce's commitment to community and the concerns expressed here about division and separation, require that the notion of loyalty is underpinned by a biblical idea of community. This is found in the idea of the Kingdom of God. The idea of a kingdom speaks to human beings of places of belonging and loyalty. Calvin clearly approaches consideration of the kingdom of God from the perspective of belonging and behaviour. His argument is that because we belong to God, have been made God's own through the redeeming work of Christ, then behaviour in keeping with that belonging is to be expected. This ever adapting behaviour is the process of sanctification and occurs when the Lordship of Christ is more fully recognised and Christ is more freely permitted to exercise Kingship in the lives of believers.[62] Sanctification, as the ongoing work of God among believers, resists any tendency for the Church to believe it has achieved a level of loyalty which may be used to excuse dominating or excluding behaviour, making an idol of itself and of the idea of loyalty. Calvin believed that the Kingdom is evident when the Holy Spirit is at work in believers' lives and when there is obedience to God's authority.[63] In other words, the Church is living in the Kingdom of God when its loyalty to the transcendent God is such that obedience to God and behaviour in keeping with those loyal to Jesus Christ cannot be denied and is not obscured by any other loyalties.[64]

I shall, therefore, use the idea of loyalty, so dominant where there is political, cultural or ethnic conflict and unrest, but invest it with theological and biblical content and draw this underpinning from within the Reformed tradition. Loyalty must never become an end in itself but rather be theologically tied to the doctrine of sanctification and qualified as being to God. In this way, loyalty is freed from the dangers of idolatry and the church from the trap of investing such divine qualities in itself that its behaviour cannot be drawn into question. Furthermore, for the idea of loyalty to provide common ground for encounter in situations of cultural competition it must have significance for more than one denominational tradition.

As an overarching notion, loyalty to God, if it is to critique the witness of the churches in divided situations, must be espoused by more than one denomination. The notion must have meaning for Christians of every denomination if it is to bind them together first and foremost as the community of God's people and assist them to overcome the barriers erected by political difference. A look at the Roman Catholic tradition shows that there is the potential for a shared notion of loyalty to God.

The Second Vatican Council was much less concerned than Calvin to provide exposition of the nature of God. The emphasis was put on God's revelation rather than God's transcendence. Nevertheless, the God who is the author and sustainer of all things, and in that sense above all and over all, is shared by the Roman Catholic Church and expressed in *Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*:

> God, who creates and conserves all things by his Word, provides constant evidence of himself in created realities.[65]

There is also an emphasis on the obedience of faith which, 'must be our response to God who reveals.'[66] There is commonality, therefore, with the reformed tradition through the idea of obedience which requires loyalty to be expressed. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church is clear that the purpose of the Church is to be engaged in the work of the Kingdom.[67] *Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* states of the church that it:

> ... receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and is, on earth, the seed and beginning of that kingdom.[68]

As people of the Kingdom, the Christian community live with the knowledge that the Kingdom is both now and not yet. Living in the Kingdom 'now', therefore requires, 'the commitment to live and work in anticipation of what God promises.'[69] John De Gruchy, the South African theologian, here connects living in the kingdom with notions of covenant and reconciliation. De Gruchy argues that the doctrine of reconciliation arises from God's covenant with creation made new in Jesus Christ. God's covenant was to heal and restore relationship with the world, which implies a new relationship among human beings, 'respecting difference without allowing difference to foster sectarianism and division.'[70] This idea of covenant, when coupled with the notion of loyalty within the Kingdom of God, illustrates the very dynamic nature of loyalty. As the God who invites human beings into relationship becomes known in a covenant relationship so relationships among human beings are changed and restored. The covenant's intention is for the healing of relationships at every level, so loyalty can never be settled but must constantly be renegotiated both as human beings come to new insights about God and as they live in

relationship with one another. The dynamism of the notion of covenant is emphasised by De Gruchy.

> The covenant is not a static relationship but one that requires constant renewal and affirmation.[71]

In its attempts to enter into the dynamic nature of living loyalty the Church is challenged by local circumstances but also shaped by influences from the past. The influences of both past and present are explored in the following section. It has to be affirmed, however, that both proclamation and dialogue, holding together uniqueness and engagement with those who are different, are central to this thesis in developing the implications of the Church's self-understanding as a community of mission.

3. The Shaping of the Church: The influence of past and present

3.1 The Church with a sense of place

The Matthean call to the Church to go into all the world and preach the Gospel encompasses Jerusalem, Judaea and the whole world. The witness of the Church to the Gospel is, therefore, made in a variety of different local contexts. Yet the witness remains as witness to the Gospel. From an ecclesiological perspective there is tension between the universal Gospel and the locality in which it is expressed. To make effective witness to the Gospel, the Church has to take account both of its worldwide, synchronic situation and of its locality. It cannot focus on one at the expense of the other.

Jürgen Moltmann identifies some of the challenges and difficulties in holding the worldwide and local together. He argues that the church on a worldwide level often responds laboriously to the world context because on the one hand it has to make alliances with states and societies to survive and, on the other hand, it has to

take account of the opinions of its members.[72] However, the history of the Church shows that while there exists a worldwide church, there have always been groups who have exercised prophetic and reforming roles, largely through their commitment to a radical style of discipleship, and these groups have often been apart from, and critical of, the world-wide church.[73] These groups, free from the constraints of the world-wide church, may be considered to be instances of the local or localised church that cannot, and in Moltmann's view should not, be overlooked as they play a crucial role for the world-wide church,

> [f]or its orientation towards Christ and the kingdom of God, the world-wide church needs the example of the groups committed to consistent discipleship, which demonstrates the liberty of Christ more unhesitatingly than church leaders and more radically than the masses.[74]

Equally, these groups should not divorce themselves from the world-wide church, 'putting themselves in a social ghetto of their own accord.'[75] Moltmann proposes a 'double strategy' in which, 'mainstream churches and the discipleship groups remain dependent on one another.'[76] This dependence is, crucially, a matter of the ongoing reform of the church. It takes account of strategies for reform from below, through grass-roots groups, and above, from the world-wide church. Moltmann identifies the building of core groups in parishes as one way in which the double strategy operates. These groups, more committed than fringe members, strengthen themselves to reach out into their society and bring reform to the church. But,

> ... at the same time the established church of old days is preserved because it is open to the whole people and also includes passive members, fringe members, and the Christians who only go to church on major festivals.[77]

Moltmann's insights are helpful in addressing the challenge to hold in equal partnership the church, local and worldwide. The proposed core groups provide fora for discussion and exchange, and are ways of bridging the gap and enabling learning and reform.

The double commitment to local and world-wide is seen within the Reformed tradition. The Reformed Churches of the world are identified together in larger bodies such as The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC),[78] The Council of European Churches (CEC),[79] and the Leuenberg Fellowship of Churches.[80] Some Reformed Churches express a further sense of being worldwide and their belonging to a wider family of Christian traditions by membership of the World Council of Churches (WCC). At the local level each Reformed denomination has its own linkages[81] and internal democratic structures. These linkages and memberships of larger bodies are an ecclesiological expression of the world-wide nature of the church. Internal denominational structures are an expression of the ecclesiological importance of the contextual locality.

The way in which Reformed Churches are organised reflects a commitment which is both worldwide and local. In Ireland, the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly meets annually and is the ultimate decision-making body for the denomination. It is attended by representatives from every congregation in Ireland, each with an equal role and right to engage in debate, raising matters of importance to them. In this way locality is respected while holding to a dimension of universality represented by the whole denomination gathering together. Universality is further emphasised by the attendance of representatives of other Presbyterian churches, for example, the Church of Scotland, United Reformed Church in England and Wales, Presbyterian Church of Pakistan,

Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. These representatives are free to engage in debate, and while they do not have voting rights, they symbolise the worldwide Church bringing with them questions and insights from within their own locality. Ultimately each must return to their own local context to bear witness to the Gospel. Writing about world mission, Raymond Fung, WCC secretary for evangelism 1981 - 1991, affirms that mission, 'is done locally, at a particular place in a particular time, involving persons.'[82]

Ecclesiologically, therefore, the worldwide church is expressed locally and different localities are given the opportunity to challenge and debate with one another. Listening to churches from other localities is a challenge to listeners to take witness in their locality seriously. Witness is made within the synchronic context, in a world of locally peculiar economic, social and political arrangements. This was affirmed at the WCC's Third Assembly, New Delhi, 1961 in the emphasis on 'all in each place'.[83] It is in the local context that the church is called to bear effective witness to the Gospel, but with a clear sense of the worldwide Church.

In each local situation the church stands on the history of a worldwide Christian tradition, experienced and expressed from within a particular denominational or theological understanding. The diachronic context, which each denomination brings to any particular synchronic context, shapes how the church understands itself and how it responds within a local situation. This was made clear at the Fourth Assembly of the WCC, Uppsala, 1968, in the emphasis on 'catholicity'.[84] The synchronic context is partnered with the diachronic but in each local context the churches need to examine how they appropriate their own history. A particular view of history is exemplified in this thesis with the conviction that the Church knows itself in its place of locality, but also with a sense of history,

knowing itself to be part of a larger, 'catholic' history. It is to this sense of history, the diachronic experience of the Church that we now turn.

3.2 The Church 'catholic' and its sense of history

Throughout this thesis I will draw on the history of PCI in an attempt to rediscover, or uncover, aspects of that history that influence and shape Irish Presbyterians. By asking questions of these particular times in history, questions raised by the discourse of this thesis and its conclusions, it is my intention to reinvigorate synchronic witness by appealing to diachronic context. I have chosen significant moments in Irish Presbyterian history to include theological, political and social dimensions. This method is specifically designed to enable a conversation to take place between aspects of a tradition's history and theology. The conversation between theology and history also reflects the commitment of this thesis to dialogue. However, when it comes to a consideration of the influence of history, or diachronic context, and how it affects the witness of the Church, there is a question about what view of history is at work. In other words, is history being considered in a manner which permits it to retain its own authenticity while also permitting history to shape and form the Church in its present time, thereby affecting the Church's self-understanding?

In his essay, *The Meaning of History: A Theologian's Approach to History*, H. Richard Niebuhr affirms historical study as essential for the theologian, elucidating the importance of history. For Niebuhr, the study of history makes four contributions to theological understanding. Firstly, in providing some knowledge of the human community from which patterns of belief and unbelief have been received. Secondly, the study of history enables theologians to see how ideas have, or indeed have not, developed.[85] Thirdly, the study of history gives the

opportunity to discover where dominant patterns of thinking originated, and indeed in the process some forgotten and less dominant patterns can be discovered. Fourthly, Niebuhr holds that the exploration and study of history provides the theologian with opportunities to gain insight.[86]

My approach to history, for the purposes of this thesis, includes all of these intentions, but I will hope to discover some patterns of thinking which can be called upon as credible within a particular tradition, to enlighten behavioural patterns for witness in divided societies. It is an attempt to permit history to influence the present out of its forgotten or overlooked themes. The hermeneutic at work, therefore, will be one of retrieval. History will be viewed through the window of the theological and biblical discussion that has taken place in each chapter of this thesis. So history and theological reflection will be brought into conversation with one another in the hope of retrieving from within the tradition and history of PCI insights and values that may have been forgotten, not ignoring insights and values that have not been forgotten and that are still influential.

The particular moments in history that have been chosen are, it could be argued, arbitrary and open to the charge of revisionism. It is not my purpose to take up these themes here but rather to state that there is a sense in which all reading of history is revisionist, in that each person reads history with the eyes of their time, place and experience. For each reader, therefore, history will spark different thoughts, reactions and challenges. With regard to which particular pieces of history are chosen, it is firstly important to acknowledge that the intention is to illuminate history with theological reflection and then to have the context in which the churches now find themselves further illuminated by reflection on history itself. The reading of our own histories, while bearing in mind the questions of

our time, can actually illuminate what we have received from our parents in the faith and our own theological perspective in the present time. The choosing of particular aspects of Irish Presbyterian history has been a matter of choosing events in times and places where there were conditions that help to explicate and test the arguments that have been made.

In her novel, *Zenia*, Margaret Atwood introduces the main character from the perspective of an historian. Her explanation of this introduction expresses the approach to history that is taken throughout this thesis:

> History is a construct, she tells her students. Any point of entry is possible, all choices are arbitrary. Still, there are definitive moments, moments we use as references, because they break our sense of continuity, they change the direction of time. We can look at these events and we can say that after them things were never the same again. They provide beginnings for us, and endings too.[87]

Those aspects history which I choose are, perhaps, arbitrary. Nonetheless, I have attempted to choose times and events which have been significant in Irish Presbyterianism and have, therefore, been seminal or shaping moments. Many different points of entry could have been chosen. These historical conversations stand alone and yet are an important part of the dialogue of this thesis as it examines change in the context of divided loyalties and the call on the community of God's people to live with an acute sense of their belonging first of all to God.

It is true that other significant historical moments could have been chosen. However, the moments chosen are justified in Herbert Butterfield's terms, as being of significance because of their connection to the present.[88] In this view of history the historian must develop a relationship with history from the perspective of the time

and place, and therefore with the particular questions and concerns of that time and place, in which she finds herself. Marrou affirms this inseparability of the historian and history:

> History is the result of the creative effort by which the historian, as the conscious subject, establishes a relationship between the past that he evokes and the present that is his own.[89]

As the purpose of considering history within the context of this thesis is to illuminate present predicaments in terms of living and bearing witness in a divided society, then there is an open acceptance of the provisionality of historical interpretation. In the words of Florovsky, '[a]ll historical interpretations are provisional and hypothetical.'[90] There is a search for enrichment from history but an acceptance that the vision of history is a retrospective vision. The interpretations offered become part of history and are then interpreted and have their impact in a new time and place. In the meantime, the study of history with relevant questions in mind may change perspectives and may bring the fruit of new discovery, for, '[i]t seems that our interpretations disclose, in some enigmatic way the hidden potentialities of the actual past.'[91]

The history of PCI, in its political and social circumstances, is important for this thesis as an attempt is made to retrieve themes and ideas, theological and biblical, which illuminate and call for Christian living in divided societies. This 'creative effort', with all its limitations and provisionality, is intended to bear the fruit of new and enlightening discovery. It may be considered in similar terms to the Irish School of Ecumenics Reconciliation of Memories project in which,

> ...scholars from the disciplines of philosophy, history, education, the social sciences, literary criticism, and theology were brought together to

> analyze the experiences and perceptions of the different communities in Ireland.[92]

The importance of the project of remembering is emphasized by Richard Kearney, Professor of Philosophy at University College, Dublin.

> The attempt to erase historical remembrance can result in enslavement to the ephemeral immediacies of the past. … A culture invents its future by reinventing its past.[93]

There are clear dangers in forgetting, but much hope is found in the project of remembering. History and a sense of place are, therefore, affirmed as important themes for this thesis.

4. Themes and influences: Informing the discussion

4.1 The centrality of a scriptural discourse

Throughout this thesis there is a recurrent scriptural discourse to both challenge and represent the Reformed tradition. For this thesis, the scriptural discourse is constantly associated with a theological discourse, the mechanism by which the Church relates scripture and context, churches and their context. The crucial linkage between scripture and God's purposes in the world through constancy in mission is affirmed, and the centrality of scripture recognised, in PCI's Mission Statement (See Appendix B – *Mission Statement of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*):

> **THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND**, as a Reformed Church within the wider body of Christ, is grounded in the Scriptures, and exists to love and honour God through faith in His Son and by the power of His Spirit, and to enable her members to play their part in fulfilling God's mission in our world.

The inclusion of a scriptural discourse raises the question of how scripture is understood to function within the life of the Church. Claiming the centrality of scripture, and the consequent necessity of a scriptural discourse, does not fully resolve the question. The question is illuminated by the tension between the traditional Christian understanding of scripture as revelatory text, as given by God, and the need to interpret scripture within the life of the Church to shape Christian identity and guide the life and witness of the Church. Thiselton poses the issue:

> Traditional Christian theology finds a 'given' not primarily in human processes of interpretation, but in biblical texts and in the messages which they convey, even if the role of interpretation is shaping what we *count as* a given is *also* duly recognized.[94]

Thiselton here conveys the spectrum within the concept of givenness, acknowledging that even when the Church understands biblical texts to be revelatory and accepts that interpretation itself shapes what it understands to be revelatory, there is common commitment to what is given by God. To speak of a relevant, contextualized scriptural discourse may appear, then, to relativize what is given. Issues regarding the reading and interpretation of scripture and the charge of relativism will be addressed more fully in Chapter Two, but here it is important to note some of the dynamics and challenges of biblical hermeneutics. Relativism is a valid charge when the text is read in a way that cuts it loose from its original context and orients it entirely towards the reader's context. Indeed, there are dangerous overtones of unnecessary compromise. Thiselton helpfully resolves this difficulty using the biblical traditions of 'gift' and 'givenness'. He cites the story of Joshua in which the Promised Land was given. The Promised Land, 'became visible and evidential in the people's capacity to enter it and to appropriate it.'[95]

Thiselton uses the same idea of gift and givenness in regard to 1 Corinthians 12 vv4-11 in which it is clear that gifts of the Holy Spirit become operative in actions; and in James 2 vv14 – 26 with its emphasis on the need for given gifts to be actualized. The text itself remains intact as what is given, while the context becomes the place where the gift is actualized. Thus in developing a discourse with scripture, the author of the text, the text itself and the reader in her context all play a part. Through the reading of the text the Christian community not only learns about God but also receives guidance and instruction from God. Thiselton sums it up:

> In traditional Christian theology, the biblical writings are perceived to function not only as words *about* God, but also as words *from* God.[96]

Scriptural discourse, consequently, cannot be separated from the life of the Christian community. In fact, the life of the Christian community makes the Word credible. The theological emphasis is on incarnation and the hermeneutic one of 'embodied' text. In developing a scriptural discourse there can be no ultimate separation between what the Christian community understands about God and Christian ethical living. The two are radically inter-linked and any scriptural discourse has to take account of that inter-linking in terms of how the learning impacts on and shapes Christian living. In situations of ethnic conflict, where there is competition for allegiance, there are questions for the churches arising from a scriptural discourse. These questions can be considered in respect of the author of the text, the specific text within the broad scriptural corpus and the context of the reader without relativizing or compromising the givenness of scripture. The givenness becomes living event as the gift of the gospel is lived by the Christian community. Questions addressed to the church from situations of ethnic conflict

are the focus of the next chapter and will, therefore, take up matters regarding embodying the text in that particular situation.

4.2 Ecclesial streams in the discussion

The history of the Church offers insights from its various strands. Here I employ, as representative of the Reformed tradition, *The Westminster Confession.* Irish Presbyterians have adopted *The Westminster Confession* [97] as a 'subordinate standard'.[98] The Assembly of Divines, who compiled *The Westminster Confession*, were in search of a comprehensive expression of Christian faith in confessional terms. I approach *The Westminster Confession* with a hermeneutic of retrieval, seeking to glean old insights in a new way that is of value in a context of ethnic competition.

I also use the Documents of *Vatican II* to represent a tradition outside the Reformed tradition. Roman Catholics too claim to be part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Affirming that ethnic allegiance can set one group against another and that confessional identities can reflect this I employ a hermeneutic of consonance with regard to *Vatican II* to show that there is something of the Reformed tradition in Roman Catholicism and vice versa, that each can, as it were, see something of itself in the other.

The Northern Irish situation has been typified as Protestant and Catholic set against one another because of the broad identification of Protestants with Unionism and Roman Catholics with Nationalism. To the streams of Reformed and Roman Catholic I draw upon a third stream from a long-standing ecumenical group of which I have been a longstanding member. *An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics* (hereafter *The Faith and Politics Group*) was formed at the Greenhills Ecumenical Conference in Ireland in 1983.[99] As an ecumenical strand in the Northern Irish context *The Faith and Politics Group* bring their insights to

bear on issues of conflict, identity and belonging to God. In their self-definition *The Faith and Politics Group* sum up the challenge for the churches in relation to competing allegiances:

> As members of various Christian Churches in Ireland our primary loyalty is to Jesus Christ, not to any political allegiance. We believe we are called to break down the enmity that divides us, to enter into community with each other, and to face the political realities that confront us in our world.[100]

4.3 The methodology of the conversation

As referred to in the introduction, the methodology of this thesis follows a pattern of theological reflection which is biblically, ecumenically and denominationally informed. This reflection is then brought into conversation with an aspect of Irish Presbyterian history, considered with regard to the findings of the theological reflection. For this thesis, it is important that this 'conversation' is viewed as embodying the dialogical method which is sought and examined throughout. This ecumenical methodology is employed in search of illumination from forgotten or suppressed memories, or through more critical reflection on memories in light of new discoveries or learning. The process is one not of revision of history but of retrieval from history and reform in the light of what is learned from history. This process of listening to and respecting the validity of the opinions of others is a comparative process.[101] The comparative process has different levels and stages and may involve identifying and seeking correlation, complementarity and consonance between the traditions.[102]

It needs to be said clearly that this ecumenical methodology is not about compromise but about finding what is common to address a divided context. More will be said later of the need for churches to address divided

contexts together, but it is important to put down an early marker that the methodology is not about adapting and shaping one's own beliefs to suit another at some cost to the integrity of one's own beliefs. Evans herself identifies the challenge of retaining integrity, arguing that ecumenism is not an exercise in diplomacy:

> Once we think of ecumenism as diplomacy, we think that if anything actually moves in the deadlock, that is because some poor fool has made a concession, has compromised his principles, has watered down the truth. This is a disastrous illusion. True ecumenism is listening and kneeling in the presence of God with brothers and sisters in Christ from whom the accidents of history have divided us, and asking how we may together learn the gospel way of authentic reconciliation.[103]

The possibility of difference remaining or of seemingly insurmountable obstacles persisting has to be addressed. This Evans does in her discussion about agreeing to disagree[104] but her emphasis is that disagreeing can occur within the context of agreement. The result is disagreement within a broad context of agreement, rather than complete fracture.[105] For the purposes of this thesis, the employment of a hermeneutic of consonance with the Roman Catholic Church is used to follow this practice. Consonance is not evidence that the author ignores disagreements between the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions. The method is intentionally non-adversarial in the search for dynamic, effective and faithful witness where divisions need to be healed and ways of moving forward together might be found, while at the same time acknowledging that differences and disagreements remain. It is to argue for disagreement within a context of agreement and common witness, and the development of an ethic to inform and challenge the churches for this task is the purpose of this thesis. This non-adversarial approach is at the core of ecumenical methodology.[106]

As this ecumenical methodology is pursued, questions will be asked of history, and learning in the light of theological and biblical reflection will open the possibility of retrieving and reinvigorating thinking and behaviour. It is my hope that in so doing the churches in contexts of ethnic and cultural competition and conflict will be enabled to find ways to discover reconciling insights and patterns of thinking to address their own contexts.

5. Conclusion: A threefold framework

Adopting a non-adversarial, ecumenical methodology assists us to finally identify the elements of the framework to be employed throughout this thesis. The elements are threefold and may be defined as rootedness, hermeneutical awareness, and openness. Rootedness takes account of history both in its diachronic sense of a tradition through time, and also in the synchronic sense of place in history at a given time. The idea of rootedness, however, needs to be challenged by a sense of history in its broadest perspective. In other words, the roots are examined with minds open to understand and see, as if for the first time, suppressed themes or understandings which have shaped a tradition. A hermeneutic of retrieval is important in the explication of rootedness. A sense of limitation is also important in the explication of what it means to be rooted in a tradition. Each reader of history is delimited by their own experience and context as well as by accessibility of facts and narratives from the time in history which is examined. It may also be argued that the author has delimited herself by the specific situations brought into conversation with the theological reflection. The conversation is, however, meant to provide a model for reflection rather than definitive reflection. Rootedness provides a sense of belonging and identity and these matters will be examined in Chapter Two.

Hermeneutical awareness is a necessity flowing from rootedness in order that meaningful conversation can take place between the churches, with the world, with history and with other academic disciplines. It is relevant to each tradition's relationship with history, particularly to those elements which may be obscured. Hermeneutical awareness extends to the theological and biblical concerns of this thesis which are brought into the open to be scrutinized, with a commitment to understanding the role of interpretations and how interpretive processes have been influenced. Hermeneutical awareness will be the focus of Chapter Three.

Rooted in one's own tradition and seeking to be hermeneutically aware, a search enhanced and enlivened by meaningful conversation with other traditions, will require openness to those other traditions. Openness faces up to what others have to offer, in fact goes in search of that offer, in the hope of reform or conversion and with the certainty of change. This principle has to be maintained alongside concerns about compromising integrity. How, then, openness can be boundaried in a way which retains the principle yet sustains integrity will be the focus of Chapter Four.

This framework will be applied throughout the thesis and its elements found within each chapter. Foundational to this framework is the touchstone of the Reformed tradition, for this thesis is written from within that tradition. The guiding lights of the Reformed tradition are the transcendence of God, the primacy of grace, scripture alone and the principle of *semper reformanda;* these uphold the touchstone. Based in the Reformed tradition, it is the author's concern to examine the notion of loyalty to God in order to develop an ethic for the churches in situations of ethnic and cultural competition and conflict. It is to the notion of belonging that we now turn and to its implications for the churches.

[1] That is, the historical time in which the church is situated.
[2] Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, England: IVP, 1981) p701.
[3] Jeremias agrees with Guthrie arguing from his study of the New Testament material that, '... in the midst of this world there arises the community of those who belong to the reign of God.' Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1971) p167. The debate on Jesus' intentions largely arises because the Greek word *ekklesia* appears only twice in the gospels, both times in Matthew, and on each occasion it is used with a different meaning. In Matthew 16.8 it is used to refer to the whole church while in 18.17 to individual communities. It is further argued that as Jesus expected the end-time there was little point in his gathering a community together. Jeremias however, concludes, ' ... the *only* significance of the whole of Jesus' activity is to gather the eschatological people of God.' Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology,* p170.
[4] John 17 vv20-21 is taken as the basis of the ecumenical movement connecting mission and unity. 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that world may believe that you have sent me.' The prayer of Jesus before his death remains the prayer of the ecumenical movement for unity, that the world may believe and is, therefore, a factor in the mission of the Church.
[5] 1 Corinthians 12.12f.
[6] Ephesians 5.25.
[7] 1 Corinthians 3.9.
[8] 1 Peter 2.9-10.
[9] *Sola scriptura*, or scripture alone, was an emphasis of the Reformation theologians as they formulated their position in reaction to and critique of the theological context of their day. This remains a crucial theme in Reformed thinking.
[10] As a member of a Reformed denomination the author is painfully aware of the difficulties of terminology. To use the term, 'tradition,' is to open the floodgates on the debate about the centrality of scripture, the validity of Tradition and the clash between the two. It is not my intention to uphold tradition as equal to scripture in the formation of the Church, but rather, in using the term, to acknowledge that each Christian community is grounded in an historical context, brought to it by the life of the denomination over years, and hence shaped by its own history. When I write of tradition, therefore, I am writing about the history of a particular denomination with its own historical experience, theological emphases and social dynamics. To argue that each denomination has its own tradition is not to argue for Tradition, but to acknowledge a traditioning process in which and despite which Reformed churches, and they are not alone, struggle to remain faithful to the witness, calling, and revelation of scripture.
[11] This suppression is often for very good reasons such as the avoidance of conflict and the desire to hold a denomination together, the need for churches to respond to particular situations that lead to emphasis on one historical theme as opposed to another, or simply as a matter of choosing from the tradition that which enables it to be relevant. All these choices mean that some of the historical memory of the denomination may be suppressed.
[12] This group is often referred to and known as *The Faith and Politics Group*. *The Faith and Politics Group* reflect on politics and religion, produce documents for study and meet with people who can inform their thinking or to whom they wish to offer challenge. They are a group of women and men, clergy and lay, Protestant and Roman Catholic and are drawn from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

[13] W. A. Visser 'T Hooft, 'The General Ecumenical Development since 1948' in, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517 – 1968, II*, Harold E. Fey ed., (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993) p 10.
[14] Günther Gassmann, 'Report to the Secretariat: Stavanger 1985 to Budapest 1989,' pp55-69, in Thomas F. Best ed., *Faith and order 1985-1989: The Commission Meeting at Budapest 1989* (Geneva, WCC Publications, 1998. Faith and Order Paper 148) p60.
[15] Robin Boyd, 'Focus of Unity: Ultimate and Penultimate Goals of the Christian Movement,' *Scottish Journal of Theology*, pp459-480, Vol. 50 No. 4 1997, p461.
[16] 'Reflecting on our journey since Lima and on the dynamics of the unity and renewal process, I am bold to say that the polarity between unity and justice, between mission and unity, has been greatly lessened. We come to Budapest with a new confidence in the complementarity of the unity of the church and the renewal of human community.' Paul A. Crow Jr., 'The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community: a perspective from Budapest,' pp134-145, in, Thomas F. Best ed., *Faith and order 1985-1989: The Commission Meeting at Budapest 1989*, p136. The Statement to the Churches from the Plenary Commission argued, 'The text holds up a mirror to our churches so that under the judgement and grace of God we may be renewed and become what we were meant to be. As community we are to be an effective sign and instrument of the Kingdom of God for the sake of the unity and renewal of humankind in God's creation.' Ibid. p23.
[17] Ibid. p137.
[18] Frederick R. Wilson ed., *The San Antonio Report: Your Will be Done: Mission in Christ's Way* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990) p20.
[19] 'God calls us, Christians everywhere, to join in: proclaiming the Good News of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ; acting in solidarity with those who suffer and struggle for justice and human dignity; sharing justly the earth's resources; bearing witness to the gospel through renewed communities in mission.' Ibid. p22f.
[20] 'Everywhere the churches are in missionary situations. Even in countries where the churches have been active for centuries we see life organized today without reference to Christian values, a growth of secularism understood as the absence of any final meaning. … The situation is so urgent that it demands priority attention of the ecumenical movement.' Ibid. p29.
[21] Ibid. p27.
[22] The mission is to share the gospel and it is based in an understanding of God who sent Jesus into the world. The mission of the church is, therefore, to be a reflection of a sending God who continues to send the community of faith.
[23] Even devout people of other faiths who live with a sense of a transcendent Being and whose belief drives them to a concern for justice, often no different from Christian concern, are still outside the fold of followers of Christ for they have not received the truth. Formal change in understanding the missionary mandate came at Canberra 1991. Two significant developments within the ecumenical movement may be considered pertinent to the radical change. On the one hand there had been a growth in fundamentalism and on the other hand a growth of openness. This polarization required a strong statement from the Canberra Assembly to elucidate the position of the WCC. Yet despite the Canberra Assembly's statement there remains unrest within the ecumenical movement. Many still feel that the dialogical approach to mission denies the calling of the Church and the uniqueness of the Gospel as the means to salvation. The Evangelical participants at the Canberra Assembly voiced their unease, feeling that Christological and theological concerns were not fully addressed: 'We argued for a high Christology to serve as the

only authentic Christian base for dialogue with persons of other living faiths … At present, there is insufficient clarity regarding the relationship between the confession of the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to scripture, the person and world of the Holy Spirit, and legitimate concerns which are part of the WCC agenda.' As cited in Michael Kinnamon & Brian Cope eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997) p238.

[24] *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1979) Chapter XVI paragraph 7.

[25] Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Mission in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper, 1938) p105.

[26] 'Interfaith relations were basically understood, in other words, as preparation for evangelism – a position that prevailed in ecumenical discussions, despite various voices in opposition, for the next generation.' Michael Kinnamon & Brian Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices,* p393.

[27] J. D. Douglas ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: Official Reference Book of the First Congress on World Evangelization (*Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975) Lausanne Covenant Section 3, pp3-9.

[28] *The Struggle Continues: Official Report, Third Assembly All Africa Council of Churches, Nairobi, 1975* p53. As cited in Michael Kinnamon and Brian Cope eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices,* p364.

[29] At the WARC Consultation on *Gospel and Cultures* held in Indonesia in 1996, Karel Blei noted: 'In the 18th and 19th centuries, Reformed missionaries from the West went abroad, having the intention of bringing their faith, their way of believing, to the peoples far away. As we all know, this missionary expansion happened in close association with colonial expansion. Christian faith was seen as identical with the way it was experienced and lived in the West. In this respect, reformed missionaries were no exception. They were as eager as other missionaries were to plant churches after the image of their own church.' H. S. Wilson ed., *Gospel and Cultures: Reformed Perspectives – The papers and findings of the WARC Consultation held at Rentepao, Tana Toraja, Sulawesi Selatan, Indonesia from 5 to 10 February 1996 (*Geneva: WARC, 1996) p14.

[30] *The Coleraine Declaration*, Appendix A, paragraph 4.1.

[31] 'No matter what happened to the cement of communist ideology and bureaucratic power that had kept them together for the better part of the twentieth century, these separate and distinct nations and ethnic groups would remain intact.' Vamik Volkan, *Bloodlines: From ethnic pride to ethnic terrorism* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997) p3.

[32] Ibid. p11.

[33] Volkan lists the countries of the world in which lives were lost due to ethnic conflict and terrorism: Afghanistan, Algeria, Angola, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Cambodia, Colombia, Georgia, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Liberia, Myanmar, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkey, United Kingdom, Zaire, and Northern Ireland. Ibid. p16f.

[34] Ibid. p16f.

[35] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) p2.

[36] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1999) p221.

[37] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory,* p221.

From the perspective of social anthropology, Eriksen offers another view of identity, with its boundary markers and influences. He looks at language as an ethnic boundary marker among immigrants. This

boundary marker can also be put to another use so that language becomes a means for integration into a community. So an immigrant who learns to speak the language of the country to which she has come to live finds language to be both a boundary marker (when using the native language) and assistance in integration (when the language of the new land is spoken fluently and well). Eriksen considers that ethnic organisation can function as a defence against discrimination and resistance to assimilation or as a political strategy and expression of identity. For Eriksen, setting is important in the consideration of identity and culture, and he concludes, relevantly, that, '(t)he cultural content of identities changes, as does the *social relevance of cultural content.*' Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London/Sterling Virginia: Pluto Press, 1993) p138.

[38] 'Communitarianism held that belonging to a community is a primary feature of personhood, while liberals argue the primacy of the individual.' Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, p146.

[39] 'What is peculiar to the modern West among such higher civilisations is that its favoured formulation for this principle of respect has come to be in terms of rights.' Charles Taylor, *Sources of The Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p11.

[40] 'To talk of universal, natural, or human rights is to connect respect for human life and integrity with the notion of autonomy. It is to conceive people as active co-operators in establishing and ensuring the respect which is due them.' Ibid. p12.

[41] Ibid. p30.

[42] 'What is at stake is the possibility of achieving common insight in a cultural situation where it is recognised that such commonality must be based on an acceptance that meaning and value have their source in particular experiences mediated by traditions.' Robert Gascoigne, *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p180f.

[43] Duncan Morrow, 'The Churches and Peace Building in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties: Learning from PEACE II,' pp 5-8, in, *Beyond Sectarianism? The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process* (Belfast: Profile Publishing, 2005) p5.

[44] '... many people are tempted to do something much more violent. They create or submit to structures that give their own subgroup a strong sense of uniqueness and then couple that with the need for integration with the world.' Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The future of world religions, violence and peacemaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p6.

[45] Ibid. p6.

[46] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, p59.

[47] Frank Wright, *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987) p287.

[48] The view here is supported by Gillian Evan's work on ecumenical dialogue in which she argues, 'Concepts of betrayal are relevant here because it has seemed to some that there is a risk of 'compromise of loyalty'. ... If all parties are confident that they are now acting and thinking as one Church there can be no 'betrayal', and no 'compromise of loyalty'.' G. R. Evans, *Method in Ecumenical Theology: The Lessons So Far* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996) p82f.

[49] WCC, Faith and Order Paper 196, *Faith And Order At The Crossroads: Kuala Lumpur 2004, The Plenary Commission Meeting*, Thomas F. Best ed. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005) p 203.

[50] 'The Lord, therefore, is King of Kings. When he opens his sacred mouth, he alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all. We are

subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only to the Lord.' John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983) Chapter IV, Paragraph XX.32 p675.

[51] Ibid. p676.

[52] François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963) p151. How this transcendent God is known becomes a central concern for Calvin who argues that scripture is the key to knowing God, but only when it is approached with the heart of faith. 'If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture. Hence the first step in true knowledge is taken, when we reverently embrace the testimony which God has been pleased therein to give of himself.' John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Chapter 1, Paragraph VI.2, p66.

[53] Ibid. Chapter 1, Paragraph 2.1, p41.

[54] 'This exclusive definition, which we uniformly meet in Scripture, annihilates every deity which men frame for themselves of their own accord – God himself being the only fit witness to himself.' Ibid. Chapter 1, Paragraph X1.1, p91.

[55] 'It hence appears that men do not fall away to the worship of idols until they have imbibed some idea of a grosser description: not that they actually believe them to be gods, but that the power of divinity somehow or other resides in them. Therefore, whether it be God or a creature that is imaged, the moment you fall prostrate before it in veneration, you are so far fascinated by superstition.' Ibid. Chapter 1 Paragraph XI.9, p98.

[56] Ibid. Chapter 1 Paragraph X11.1, p105.

[57] Josiah Royce (1855-1916) was an American philosopher and teacher. He became the leading American exponent of idealism. Royce emphasized the social and cultural influences on identity.

[58] John K. Roth ed., *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982) p22.

[59] 'The willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause.' Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908) p16.

[60] Ibid. p121.

[61] Royce connects the notion of loyalty with religious life. 'The religious man lives in the faith that a fulfilling community of being is a reality. Such faith, expressed through ritual, myth, and sacred writings, can help to foster a life of loyalty. On the other hand, the ultimate meaningfulness of the life of loyalty rests on the hope that a fundamentally religious vision of reality is true. The life of loyalty, then, both pushes towards and can be sustained by a religious lifestyle.' John K. Roth ed., *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce,* p25.

[62] ' ... God reigns when men, in denial of themselves, and contempt of the world and this earthly life, devote themselves to righteousness and aspire to heaven.' John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Chapter III, Paragraph XX.42, p189.

[63] 'Thus this kingdom consists in two parts: the first is, when God by the agency of his Spirit corrects all the depraved lusts of the flesh, which in bands war against Him; and the second, when he brings all our thoughts into obedience with his authority.' Ibid. p189.

[64] Calvin, as the other Reformers, placed a crucially strong emphasis on justification by faith. But he was also keen to point out that salvation is received by grace though faith is the beginning of a process of regeneration or sanctification. It is a process of Christ taking possession of lives, of an individual's whole being, as the old

being is put to death and the new life is participated in. 'This renewal, indeed, is not accomplished in a moment, a day, or a year, but by uninterrupted, sometimes even by slow, progress God abolishes the remains of carnal corruption in his elect, cleanses them from pollution, and consecrates them as his temples, restoring all their inclinations to real purity, so that during their whole lives they may practice repentance, and know that death is the only termination to this warfare.' Ibid. Chapter III, Paragraph III.9, p516.

[65] Austin Flannery O.P. ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1995) *Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 1.3, p98.

[66] Ibid. p99.

[67] 'Whether it aids the world or whether it benefits from it, the church has but one sole purpose – that the kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the human race may be accomplished.' Austin Flannery O.P. ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents, Gaudium et Spes* 4.45, p215.

[68] Austin Flannery O.P. ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents, Lumen Gentium* 1.5, p4.

[69] John W De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002) p213.

[70] Ibid. p185.

[71] Ibid. p187f.

[72] 'Churches on a national scale are compelled to make concordats with society and the state if they want to operate publicly. Moreover, they must adapt themselves to the average opinion prevailing among their members. Consequently they are relatively inflexible.' Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 1977) p325.

[73] Moltmann notes, for example, the Monastic Movement and the Waldensians.

[74] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, p325.

[75] 'The organizations of the mainstream church should not therefore attempt to bring these groups under their control. To do so would be to destroy the forces of their own renewal. But these groups must not deny the mainstream church and emigrate from it altogether. To do so would be to rob themselves of their own destiny.' Ibid. p326.

[76] Ibid. p326.

[77] Ibid. p332.

[78] WARC was founded in 1875 and presently has more than 200 member churches with roots in the Reformation. It aims to strengthen the unity and witness of Reformed churches, interpreting and reinterpreting the Reformed tradition.

[79] CEC is a conference of Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic churches in Europe, together with 43 associated organisations. It was formed in 1959 and members are committed to living and witnessing together in the spirit of ecumenism, sharing, understanding and mutual respect. For example, CEC joined with the European Conference of Catholic Bishops in two major assemblies addressing, in 1989, justice, peace, and creation, and in 1997, addressing reconciliation.

[80] The Leuenberg Church Fellowship was formed in March 1973 at Leuenberg, near Basel. It is a Fellowship of Lutheran, Reformed and United churches who have adopted the Leuenberg Agreement between the Reformation churches in Europe. Member churches are committed to pulpit and table fellowship, common service and witness at local, regional and European level and to ongoing theological study and debate.

[81] For Example, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has, in its history, had formal linkages with the Church of Ireland and Methodist churches and also with the Reformed Presbyterian Church.

[82] Raymond Fung, *Evangelistically Yours: Ecumenical Letters on Contemporary Evangelism* (Geneva WCC Publications, 1992) p127.
[83] '*We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, …*' W. A. Visser't Hooft ed., *The New Delhi Report* (London: SCM Press, 1962) p116.
[84] 'The Church is catholic, and should be catholic, in all her elements and in all aspects of her life, and especially in her worship.' Norman Goodall ed., *The Uppsala Report,1968* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1968) p13.
[85] David Tracy is firm in his acceptance of the history which shapes individuals and groups. 'We are inevitably shaped by the history we were born into. With critical thought, responsible actions, and some luck, we may help to change history in some small measure.' David Tracy, *Plurality And Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (London: SCM, 1998) p66. He also is clear that history is not straightforward and we are as much shaped from those aspects of history which have been interrupted for us. So there are aspects of individuals and groups which are not always consonant with their tradition and these too need to be explored. 'Although we do belong to language and history more than they belong to us, we should be wary of using too easily such words as *belong* and *participate*. We must confront the interruptions embedded in our history …' Ibid. p67. Tracy argues that, however paradoxically, we belong also to the interruptions and he cites as examples complacency in face of the holocaust, changes in the use of terminology, things that would shame us, as well as those which bring us pride.
[86] H. Richard Niebuhr 'The Meaning of History: A Theologian's Approach to History' in William Stacy Johnson ed., *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1966) p79f. David Tracy proposes another framework for responding to history which includes facing the interruptions, discarding accounts written as the triumph of the innocent and remembering the subversive, often the actions of unnamed people. 'If we attempt such responses, we are making a beginning – and only a beginning in assuming historical responsibility.' David Tracy, *Plurality And Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, p69.
[87] Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride* (London: QPD, 1993) p4.
[88] In his consideration of the relationship between historical scholarship and life, Butterfield notes that the study of history can result in three things - the singing of songs and writing of poetry; it can be romanticised about and cause the reader or rememberer to feel nostalgic; or it can influence the level of interest in it because of its relationship to the present. For example, the Protestant interest in the Reformation is clearly because of the root this provides for the tradition. Thus Butterfield argues, '[t]he past in fact must never be regarded as a fossil or as having existed merely to be the object of the historian's scientific curiosity.' Florovsky too affirms the belief that history is not a static record but a living, engaging reality. 'In this approach to and view of history it is clear that history cannot be thought of only as a record of fact, although such a record, as far as it is possible to obtain it, is important. Neither can the historian be thought of as a constructor of facts for that would be to undermine the authenticity of the historical time being recalled.' Georges Florovsky, 'The predicament of the Christian historian' in C. T. McIntire, *God, History and Historians: Modern Christian Views of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) p411.
[89] Henri-Irenee Marrou, 'History and the Historian are inseparable' Ibid. p394. Florovsky, in his consideration of the Christian historian

puts it another way: 'Actually, no historian begins with the past. His starting point is always in the present, to which he himself belongs.' Georges Florovsky, 'The predicament of the Christian historian' Ibid. p420.

[90] Ibid. p420.

[91] Ibid. p424.

[92] Alan D. Falconer & Joseph Liechty, 'Preface to the Second Edition,' pp7-8, in, Alan D. Falconer & Joseph Liechty, *Reconciling Memories* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1998) p8.

[93] Richard Kearney, 'Myth and the Critique of Tradition,' pp37-56, in Alan D. Falconer & Joseph Liechty, *Reconciling Memories,* p38.

[94] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Bible Reading* (London: Harper Collins, 1992) p63.

[95] Ibid. p64. Joshua 1 vv2-5, & 13-14, c v2, 8 v1, 10 v12 and 11 v3.

[96] Ibid. p70.

[97] *The Westminster Confession of Faith* was compiled by the Westminster Assembly of Divines who met in the years between 1643 and 1647. Like other confessions of faith *The Westminster Confession* defines theological characteristics, liturgical practices, personal devotion and moral viewpoints. It contains thirty-three chapters beginning with reflection on Scripture and moving to God, the Trinity, Divine Decree, Creation, Providence, Sin, The Mediator, the Christian Life, the Sacraments, Resurrection and the Last Things. Thomas Torrance, the Scottish Reformed theologian, writes of *The Westminster Confession*, that, 'it was the great confession of Calvinist scholasticism which brought into quasi-credal form the core of the systematised doctrine of the great Reformed dogmaticians in the early post-Calvin era.' Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996) p125.

[98] By this is meant an accepted standard of the church but subordinate to scripture.

[99] See reference 12.

[100] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Breaking Down the Enmity: Faith & Politics in the Northern Ireland Conflict (*Belfast: Shanway Distributors, 1993) p61.

[101] It is proposed by John D'Arcy May, for example, in his discussion on ecumenical dialogue, and, '... involves as methodological steps the synchronic and diachronic description of dogmatic differences between the denominations, the systematic logical reconstruction of these differences, and their metatheoretical reconstruction of a level of abstraction which reveals their presuppositions, both rational and irrational, theological and non-theological.' John May, 'From ecumenical theology to fundamental ecumenics' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* Vol. 14, 1997, pp304-312, p310.

[102] Correlation involves not only sharing denominational histories but also developing an awareness of what theological interpretive frameworks are being used. Complementarity is about identifying what is common to one another and consonance identifies commonalities and resonances between the traditions. G. R. Evans, *Method in Ecumenical Theology: The lessons so far,* p30. Of consonance Evans argues that it has, '... proved an important aspect of comparative methodologies as it is employed at a more developed stage of dialogue. Ibid. p31.

[103] Ibid. p81.

[104] Ibid. p80.

[105] This can be illustrated from the Roman Catholic-Reformed dialogue, 1984-1990. The participants acknowledged the enrichment of pursuing the complementary method. 'There are differences of perspective such that we find in the position of the partner a

complementary point of view or a different accent on a single commonly-held truth. In opening ourselves to the partner's critique we can learn to express our own views in a more balanced way and perhaps find a common frame of reference for understanding one another.' Ibid. p91. But at the same time what appeared to be, for the time being at least, insurmountable obstacles were also identified. 'Some of our positions seem simply to diverge. They appear mutually incompatible or incommensurable … That leaves us, for the present at least, with no choice but to agree to disagree, while seeking clarity about the nature of our disagreement.' Ibid. p92.

[106] 'Ecumenical method seeks to be non-adversarial and that again is something largely new; and is perhaps more than any other single factor constitutive of good ecumenical method.' Ibid. p24. 'If there is to be progress, the parties have to move next to true reciprocity in their attitudes, treating the other as an equal in a common allegiance to Christ.' Ibid. p87.

CHAPTER 2 BEGINNING IN BELONGING

PART I: The identity of the Church

1. Setting the scene: a question of belonging

1.1 The Church in its context

This chapter will examine the identity of the Church in the context of the array of ethnic conflicts that have taken place since 1989. It will be argued that if the Church simply and uncritically reflects the divisions in society, relating to contested space and divided loyalties, then a heavy price will be paid in the effectiveness of the Church's witness to the gospel and a distortion of the life and being of the church will result. To uncritically reflect the divisions of society and take up a position on one side or another, it will be argued, is to ignore the influence of a context of ethnic conflict, and in particular the demands that competing ethnic loyalties place on people's lives. The witness must be given in the knowledge that church members and structures reflect and experience the same dynamics as the context in which they are situated, culturally, politically and denominationally. But at the same time, the identity of the church is not solely bound up with the context in which it is situated. Rather, the Church finds an overarching and shared identity in Jesus Christ. Failure to recognize contextual influences, however, results in a failure to reflect on how the church can most effectively bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, challenging and encouraging people in a way that speaks to their lives and renders the gospel a living reality. This shared identity invites from the churches relationship beyond cultural, political and denominational allegiances. Denominational allegiances will be the focus of Chapter Four.

Awareness of the context is not the guiding principle for the Church. Those from the Reformed tradition, in their emphasis on God's revelation as complete, remind the Church

that it is led by God and not by the world. However, if the Church is to effectively address people's experience, then it must live and speak the message it espouses in the context of time and place which influence, and often distort, how God's revelation is understood.

Drawing on a variety of sources, insights will be sought on how to be the Church in a situation where demands for ethnic allegiance take on the dynamics of a religion, seeking uncompromising allegiance from those belonging to the ethnic group. The key belonging for followers of Christ, and therefore their first allegiance, is, it will be argued, to God and not to an ethnic group. The tension in allegiances is acknowledged and the Church is called upon to provide assistance to its members to reflect on their places of belonging and the impact of those places of belonging on their allegiances, lifestyle, beliefs, and practices. Yet the very intention to apply an adjudicating principle can be subverted by cultural allegiances and influences, evidencing the necessity of the task of discernment and adjudication. This chapter, therefore, aims to take seriously the rootedness of the church in Jesus Christ, but also its historical rootedness, diachronically and synchronically. Hermeneutical awareness is called for in the adjudication of places of belonging in order that historical influences can be probed and allegiance to God applied. As hermeneutical awareness is exercised, openness to reform becomes possible and conversion to God realizable.

1.2 The effects of competing identities on the Church

It is the task and calling of the Church to find ways of effectively speaking and living the important message of the gospel. But the privileged position which the Church once held in society has weakened as other influences have come to shape identity, forming people's lives in new and ever-changing ways.

Anton Houtepen notes the myriad of influences on people's lives that form identity but which are less and less rooted in the Church:

> Belief is formed and nurtured – or it is abandoned and goes to seed – in a completely new complex of cultural influences: breeding grounds for thought like the media, the trends of the day, literature and the theatre, involvement and action.[1]

He notes a consequent alienation from Church, indicated by decreasing numbers of Christians in Western Europe. To many people, Church is peripheral. The decentralization of Church is matched by the lack of any significant, global move towards the unity of the churches. Despite the fears of many evangelicals, the ecumenical movement has not resulted in a centralized, homogenized church. The ecumenical movement has not prevented the emergence of around two hundred new churches each year. Across Europe and North America, as secularization has taken hold, the Church has found itself slipping from the centre of life at every level. People, including the community of believers, are confronted by innumerable places in which to root themselves.

In Western culture one of the results of this decentralization of the Church has been, in the words of Dorothee Sölle, theology lecturer at New York's Union Seminary, 'trivial atheism.'[2] Allegiance to God, which shapes and forms Christian identity, is not the motivating force in trivial atheism. The trivializing of allegiance to God diminishes Christian identity and robs the Church of its distinctive sense of identity. A trivialized identity in God permits other allegiances to take on the dynamics of a religion, becoming key factors in shaping identity. Contexts of ethnic allegiance, where conflicting aspirations define different groups, permit nationalisms to become as gods and undermine the Church's witness to the

distinctiveness and universality of the Christian message. *The Faith and Politics Group* define this challenge to the churches in Northern Ireland:

> We should be clear that nationalisms are religions, having their own form of the sacred, with stories of sacrifices and redemptive violence. We know that these stories can have great power over us but, nevertheless, they are delusions that take us into conflict and violence. The God of Jesus Christ tells us: unmask these gods; stop making victims of ourselves and others; turn and find peace.[3]

While forms of the sacred may give some level of spiritual meaning to people's lives and even inspire them at times to good work, these nationalisms also have the power to delude people. The deluding stories of nationalisms of any kind effectively set up gods who demand from people the kind of loyalty that belongs only to God. In a situation of ethnic competition, loyalty becomes the touchstone and challenges the Christian community, particularly an ethnically divided Christian community, to persistently question to whom its core allegiance lies.

1.3 Loyalty to God above all other loyalties

The acknowledgement of *The Faith and Politics Group,* that nationalisms behave as religions, raises a question for the Christian community regarding its loyalties in situations where such nationalisms make the demands consistent with religious demands on people's lives. I will argue that the theme of loyalty to God above all other gods is an appropriate biblical and theological principle to be employed by the Christian community as a guiding ethical principle. The principle provides a hermeneutical key with which to adjudicate rootedness, converting that which is rooted in culture or context, to God. Biblically the theme of loyalty to God above all other loyalties is

based on the first commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me',[4] of which Calvin writes in *The Institutes*:

> The purport of this commandment is, that the Lord will have himself alone to be exalted in his people, and claims the entire possession of them as his own. 2:8:16[5]

Anything, then, that would appear to possess the people of God more than Godself is to be approached by the community with suspicion. The commandments were given to the Hebrews as they journeyed towards the Promised Land. In the book of Exodus we read that on their journey they were to be confronted by worship of a variety of gods and it would be crucial that they had some guidelines as they encountered peoples who employed different forms of worship and shared a variety of religious understandings. That God was to be their one and only God became an adjudicating principle worked out within the community of God's people. This understanding was further explicated for the Hebrews when Moses returned from Sinai with the tablets of stone on which were engraved the Ten Commandments. With regard to the first commandment, Exodus 34 contains a discourse on relationships with other peoples and the instruction to remove all evidence of the worship practices of other religions.[6] In other words, it was made clear that God would tolerate no rivals either in the wilderness years or at any time afterwards.

In the development of an ethic to underpin and guide engagement with those who are different, denominationally, culturally or politically, the commands of God in Exodus 34 arrest progression and insist that account be taken of the biblical impulse towards separation. How such an impulse is to be interpreted, and indeed acknowledged as one among other biblical impulses, will be the focus of Chapter Three. Here the Exodus story reveals the pull of loyalties that exist for God's

people and the challenge to uphold, first and foremost, loyalty to God. The challenge is no less real in contemporary situations of conflict, disruption and competing political aspirations. The pull of loyalty to one cause or other strains against unrivalled loyalty to God, sometimes in a tension that counters the dynamic towards openness.

In Exodus account is given of God's people who found themselves in the midst of strangers whose cultural and religious differences were evident. There the Hebrew people constantly found themselves caught in the pull between loyalty to God and loyalty to other gods. The result was the commandment[7] that has to be continually explicated and applied wherever God's people find themselves. However, the commandment to have no other gods can be viewed in a different way. In her consideration of the Exodus story as a paradigm for the Christian community, Rita Burns comments on the commandments.

> At the head of the list is the command that Israel is characterized by undivided loyalty to Yahweh. ... There follow laws which spell out how Israel's loyalty would take shape in the interactions of community members. Community wholeness required the mutual respect of persons...[8]

Burns makes it clear, therefore, that loyalty to God cannot be divorced from the life of the Christian community, it must always impact ethical living. The impulse to separation is already critiqued within the context of the commandments themselves. Centuries later the early church found itself divided by old loyalties to Judaism and Hellenism and the particular practices of these traditions. The pull of different loyalties led to the 'Council' of Jerusalem which ultimately acknowledged the validity of fidelity to different practices but also common, shared loyalty to God which was to hold in check those other

loyalties. How the tensions between loyalties may be resolved will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

Throughout the history of the Christian church there has been the pull of cultural and political loyalty but for followers of Calvin the theological theme of God's transcendence was the theocentric critique of other loyalties and places of belonging. God's transcendence, argues Calvin, renders God sovereign, and Calvin's view of God's sovereignty is indicated in his understanding of governments and human authorities. For Calvin, human authorities and governments have a God-given right to exercise authority[9] but ultimate sovereignty belongs only to God.[10] People share the common human dilemma of choosing between allegiance to the sovereign God and their allegiance to other loyalties, allegiances that invite the principle of pre-eminent loyalty to God above all other loyalties as an adjudicating principle. Calvin clearly expresses this in *The Institutes*:

> We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it ...[11]

Indeed, God is so central to the lives of the Christian community that nothing should be done without thought to the glory of God[12] for the life of the community is to be a sign of the life of Christ.[13] For Calvin, allegiance to God is clearly linked to righteousness and, therefore, right relationship with God and with neighbours is crucial. In Calvin's thinking the withdrawal of allegiance from God has left human beings in the position whereby other allegiances make claims on their lives.[14]

The theme of loyalty to God is particularly poignant in the Northern Irish context where loyalties are demanded and exploited within a community riven by differing political loyalties. To fail to afford the protectors of such political

loyalties, republican or loyalist, the 'honour' they demand is to leave oneself open, in certain contexts at least, to the possibilities of being branded traitor, driven from one's home, or having physical injury inflicted. Loyalty to a cause in Northern Ireland has cost lives, disrupted families and isolated different sections of the community from one another. The very idea of loyalty and how it is expressed is, therefore, invested with a considerable amount of political and social capital. While providing a helpful adjudication for the Christian community, it is clear that there are also inherent dangers in adopting the notion of loyalty for the critical purposes of this thesis. One of the themes that will recur is how loyalty is to be expressed without causing conflict with others. Applying loyalty as an adjudicating principle has its dangers as it may lead to intolerance of others rather than to deeper relationship with God and humility in relationship to others who are equally subverted by loyalties other than to God. However, the idea of primary loyalty to God is a useful tool, supporting hermeneutical awareness, in a context where loyalties are obviously divisive. The dangers, however, will be addressed within the ethic that is developed in the emphasis on respect for others and responsible dialogue with them.

For the Christian community, where people are politically divided, there is the question of where a common faith in Jesus Christ fits into the fractured political picture. To employ the idea of steadfast loyalty to God is to acknowledge that there are political allegiances that Christians are free to adhere to. But the principle of overarching loyalty also calls into question the divisive influence of political loyalties on a community that shares a common loyalty and sense of belonging to Jesus Christ. How this loyalty challenges other allegiances is the subject of this thesis in its attempt to propose a theological, biblical and ecumenically informed ethic for

Christian life and witness in ethnically divided contexts. In such contexts, ethnic allegiances are clearly powerful in shaping identity, raising the question of what it is that informs Christian identity in areas of contested space, and how contested ethnic allegiances, often overwritten by cultural assumptions and influences, challenge the churches.

1.4 Ethnic allegiance as a powerful force in shaping identity

The array of ethnic conflicts that arose across Europe after 1989 illustrates the complexity of demands that competing calls to allegiance place on people's lives. Serb, Croat and Kosovar Albanian assert their ethnic particularity, often with violence, despite having belonged to the one, albeit imposed, state of Yugoslavia. In Northern Ireland the conflict arises from feelings of affiliation to two separate states, Britain and Ireland. Different political aspirations have defined different ethnic groups that have set themselves in competition with one another, reinforcing their disparity with different constructions of historical events. Ethnic groups compete with one another and ethnic identity becomes a powerful force, exercising excluding dynamics, defining along ethnic lines those who belong and those who do not belong.

Ethnic identity, or ethnicity, is difficult to define for it takes into account both perceived and actual reality.[15] It denotes a coherent group of people who share a variety of things in common. With reference to the Jewish understanding of the land, Franz Rosenzweig makes clear how deep and to what extreme identity can run:

> The peoples of the world are not content with the bonds of blood. … Their will to eternity clings to the soil, to the land. The earth of their homeland is watered by the blood of their sons, for they do not trust in the

> life of a community of blood, in a community that can dispense with anchorage in solid earth.[16]

Ethnicity should not be confused with racism, although an overdeveloped sense of belonging to one ethnic group as opposed to another can be almost indistinguishable from neo-racism.[17] However it is viewed, ethnic identity requires an outsider, someone who does not belong. The one who does not belong provides a means for insiders to define themselves, aware of what they are not. Because of the complexity of defining ethnicity Vamik Volkan concludes:

> Given the range of its usage, the concept of ethnicity should be flexible, for the bloodlines that separate large groups go beyond a simple consideration of gene pools.[18]

In a report of the Committee on National and International problems to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1994, there is recognition that identity can be connected to land, culture, language, institutions (monarchy or presidency), religion, or values e.g. freedom. In Northern Ireland, conflicting ethnic allegiances have led to more than thirty years of sectarian conflict. Liechty's definition of sectarianism, arising from his study of the Northern Ireland conflict, indicates the areas from which sectarianism draws its dynamics which have the power to divide:

> Sectarianism is a complex of attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and structures, which involve religion as a significant component, [which derive from experiences of subjection, fear, and separation,] and which in turn influence or cause destructive conflict by (1) belittling or demonising rival groups, (2) reinforcing the boundaries between rival groups, or (3) justifying or enabling the domination of rival groups.[19]

In a situation of division, where loyalty is demanded, sometimes at gunpoint, churches are morally obliged to re-examine the call to loyalty to God above all others, and are invited to seek to live by the values of the gospel.

1.5 Competing identities challenge the churches

Surrounding circumstances, key in forming identity, challenge the churches to seek an understanding of identity in God. Identity in God, if further conflict and competition is to be avoided, cannot justify the kind of exclusivism which sets groups against one another. If identity in God becomes exclusive in this sense, then it becomes merely another competing identity. People may classify themselves by what they are not, defining themselves in relation to the difference which others espouse. Or people may choose a more positive statement such as 'nationalist' to define themselves, although it has to be noted that even positive designations may contain negative elements in the form of what one is not. These definitions emerge from the political, religious and social arrangements that provide the milieu for existence and the context of particular forms of belonging.

In Ireland, and Northern Ireland in particular, the milieu has been provided by two broad and conflicting aspirations, one to an independent United Ireland and the other to remaining under the governance of Great Britain.[20] This defining milieu challenges those who espouse the Christian faith to reframe and renegotiate political loyalties, and indeed all loyalties, in relation to overarching loyalty to God, so that the churches may manifest identity in God. The challenge to the churches is not, therefore, to ignore competing loyalties but to renegotiate and redefine those loyalties within the context of paramount loyalty to God. How the reformed tradition has sought to renegotiate and redefine those loyalties is further examined in section 3:2.

Here the emphasis is that there is a specific challenge to those who claim to belong to God in a situation where different identities compete and seek recognition. The challenge is how to manifest allegiance to God in a situation where there is division and conflict. It is this allegiance which then redefines all other allegiances which members of the Christian community are free to make.

2. Conflicting allegiances: to what resources can the Church turn?

2.1 The question for the Church

In a situation of competing ethnic allegiance, which often evolves into violence, what resources can the Church draw on to discover its own identity which will, in turn, affect its lifestyle? By 'Church' I mean the household of faith, the community of believers. The question of belonging and how that belonging is lived is a question for everyone who is part of the community of believers. The Church includes a variety of understandings of what living as a member of the community means, arising from a variety of local experiences and varying degrees of involvement in the global Church community.[21] For the Church, questions arise particular to each set of circumstances, but for all who consider themselves to be part of the household of faith the common, core question, is, 'Whose are we?', as opposed to, 'What are we?' The question is not so much, 'What is the Church?' for that implies something beyond the churches and takes little account of the emotional interaction of members with modes of definition. 'Whose is the Church?'[22], or 'In whom is the Church rooted?' seems to me to be a more appropriate question for the Church to ask itself as a beginning in self-understanding and self-description. The Church is, first of all, a place of belonging and those who belong to the Church consider themselves to belong to God.

Without this sense of belonging, the notion of Church is abstract and distant. However, when the Church asks itself, 'Whose are we?' the relationship with God is stressed and the sense of dynamic, ongoing relationship is emphasized.

The Westminster Confession answers the question of the Church's belonging in the affirmation that the Church belongs to God, under the authority of Jesus Christ:

> The catholick [*sic*] or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.[23]

The Westminster Confession acknowledges the fact that, despite competing demands on loyalty, for those who make up the community of believers there is a core loyalty, which is to God. In *Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* Vatican II also makes this clear as the statement of belief for the Roman Catholic Church:

> All those, who in faith look towards Jesus, the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, God has gathered together and established as the church, that it may be for each and everyone the visible sacrament of this saving unity. In order to extend to all regions of the earth, it enters into human history, though it transcends at once all times and all boundaries between peoples.[24]

Broadly speaking, in Northern Ireland the Roman Catholic Church has been associated with a nationalist political agenda and Protestant churches with a unionist political agenda. Clearly, there is challenge to both from within their own traditions, in cases where political loyalty is espoused in a way that undermines a primary allegiance to God. That politically divided Christians make the same claim for loyalty to God has ecclesiological consequences for denominational allegiances and

how they are held in the Northern Irish context. These consequences are further illuminated by insights from within the Evangelical tradition.

2.2 Insights from the Evangelical tradition

In Northern Ireland the evangelical tradition is strong. Evangelicals understand themselves to belong to God and often define themselves in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church. The popular, Protestant evangelical tradition has, historically, been drawn into the political domain, to give credence to the view, for example, that attempts to unite Ireland are attempts to bring Ireland under 'Rome Rule.' Evangelicalism has, therefore, sometimes been unable to distinguish itself from Unionism or Loyalism and has provided theological justification for holding Unionism above Nationalism, Loyalism above Republicanism. The self-reflective process among Evangelicals, as among those of other Christian traditions, is assisted by engagement with those of other theological and denominational traditions. This will be examined in Chapter Four.

The Westminster Confession affirms the Church as belonging to a God who can never be fully known. Representing the Reformed tradition, *The Westminster Confession* emphasizes God as transcendent and self-revealing. It expresses the immensity of God far beyond knowing and the fact that God makes God known:

> God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and he is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, not deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory, in, by, unto, and upon them: he is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom, are all things; ...[25]

The affirmation of God as self-revealing emphasizes that the Church belongs to God. God does not belong to the

Church. Any tradition, therefore, that claims truth and knowledge of God for itself, at the expense of others, can be said to tend towards 'domesticating' God. A tendency to domesticate God can challenge God's freedom to reveal Godself wherever, whenever, and to whomever God chooses. In the evangelical and broad Reformed tradition *The Westminster Confession* resists the tendency to domesticate God in this way by affirming God as self-revealing and never fully known. But if the Church belongs to God then there must be a means of coming to know God. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth, the Reformed theologian, drew on the resources of his own tradition to affirm God as both beyond human domestication and also as known by people.[26]

There is a tension between the complete revelation of God and human frailty in grasping that revelation. That tension is resolved, Barth argues in his *Evangelical Theology*, in ongoing relationship with God. God remains outside the community, as the object of revelation, yet is also known to the community in a relationship of love. The relationship is ongoing and dynamic, drawing the community of faith out from itself towards a transcendent God and affecting the community as it grows in understanding of God.

In his affirmation that God is known in relationship, Barth guards against any human attempt to domesticate God, while at the same time resisting the danger of portraying the Church's loyalty to God as static. On God's part, the relationship is one of free love. For humanity the relationship is one of response that grows through further encounter and deepening understanding. With the shifts and changes of human choice, the response is sometimes one of co-operation with God but at other times it is the choice to resist the draw of God's love. Loyalty to a transcendent God is, therefore, always on the move as all other loyalties are renegotiated in the light of

growing understanding of primary loyalty to God. There is a recognizable challenge here which has to be confronted by culturally influenced Christian communities. The cultural influences on the churches may, at times, blind them to realties about themselves. It is, therefore, crucial that the churches self-consciously apply loyalty to God as a critical and adjudicating principle, in order that they might seek the freedom for relationship with God and an ever-deepening knowledge of God. It has to be emphasized that knowledge of God is given by God as complete revelation. Arrogance, separation and self-justification have no place in the Christian community precisely because knowledge of God is freely given by God, and particularly and above all in the context of covenant relationship.

2.3 Relational belonging affects the identity of the Church

God, to whom the Church belongs, is self-revealing. Understanding of that belonging grows and changes in dialogical relationship with God. In any assessment of the Church's identity and sense of belonging the element of dialogue with God is crucial. It affirms movement, change and growth. In relationship with God, what it means for belonging to God to overshadow all other belongings, grows and develops.

At a conference held under the auspices of The Corrymeela Community of Reconciliation[27] and The Irish School of Ecumenics,[28] Joseph Liechty, a Mennonite from the United States, working in Ireland, said:

> The challenges of our time, sectarianism prominently among them, require that the Churches learn to operate less in the formerly appropriate mode, as pastors to politico-religious communities largely coterminous with the Churches, and much more as prophets – and as

> nurseries for mature, prophetic Christians – in a society where Christianity cannot be assumed at all.[29]

Loyalty to God stands in critical and corrective relationship with non-negotiable loyalty to something other than God. However, this critique of all other loyalties can often appear uncompromising, as in Exodus 34. Such an apparently uncompromising critique raises questions regarding how the Church lives all other loyalties, challenging the level of attachment to ideologies or political aspirations. On the one hand, and taken in the extreme, such loyalty to God may divorce the Christian community from any engagement with society at all for to engage would be to run the risk of permitting challenge to God's central place. On the other hand, there is a clear danger of equating loyalty to God with any political ideology and divinizing the latter to become intolerant and uncompromising and hence incapable of permitting the validity of other political ideologies. Given that other loyalties may make legitimate demands and may be legitimately held, explicating loyalty to God becomes a complex matter. The explication of the Christian community's lived allegiance to God will be taken up in Chapter Three. The emphasis here is that belonging to God has to be continually renegotiated; as God is both transcendent and freely self-revealing, human beings must often struggle to understand what God has revealed. Belonging to God, therefore, has to be critiqued and behaviour renegotiated as relationship with God comes to be better understood.

3. The Church in relationship with God: conversion as the hermeneutical key

3.1 Theological discourse on identity in conversion

Christian identity, shaped in loyalty to God, is formed and reformed in constant dialogue with the transcendent God. It is a loyalty that throws all other loyalties into the shade. The

element of change and growth in the Church's identity, through the application of learning from continuing encounter with the transcendent God, may be approached theologically through the notion of conversion. 'Conversion' comes from the Greek word *metanoia* and is exegeted as repent, change one's thinking, turn about. In Judaism the primary sense always involved a change of attitude towards God that affected change in lifestyle. This is the thrust of meaning for the New Testament writers. Conversion is a process encompassing repentance, forgiveness, trust and sanctification. It is not an experience without process for, as Paul writes in Ephesians 4 vv22-24:

> You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

This sense of change, of turning towards God, is expressed by Paul alongside what the church has traditionally known as his radical conversion on the Damascus Road. For Paul, 'conversion was ... the most crucial event of his life,'[30] yet he recognised also the process of conversion in the continual putting away of the old self and clothing with the new. This understanding of conversion as a process may be felt to threaten identity for it places change, not certainty or security, at the core of Christian self-understanding. Certainty and security are natural human longings. Change is associated with uncertainty and insecurity. This is where the sense of threat arises.

Christian loyalty stands in contrast to other loyalties which see change as weakness in its compromise with, or submission to, the domination of another. Thus at the extremes of both loyalism and republicanism there remains an element unprepared to enter dialogue and unprepared to sign up to agreements which countenance the validity of other political

viewpoints. Consonance with the tradition is all-important and is exegeted as, 'no change'.

In contrast, consonance with the Christian tradition contains the notion of conversion, of constant turning towards God and being made new, of laying aside the things that tell of the old person, and putting on the things of the new life in Christ. For the Christian community change is, therefore, neither threatening nor avoidable but at the very core of consonance with a tradition ever committed to having its identity shaped in relationship with God. It may be said that Christian security, in the context of belonging, does not emanate from what Christians are, in the Northern Irish context loyalist or republican. Christian security anywhere is dependent on belonging to God. Change need not, therefore, pose a threat when it involves growing towards, and not away from, the one to whom and with whom the Christian community belongs.

The *Groupe des Dombes*[31] recognize the threat that change appears to pose, but from their Christian perspective they focus on identity as 'living reality'[32] which includes elements continuous with past experience but affected by new and enlarged experience. Identity is, therefore, about both change and continuity. Changing identity is always in line with the already accepted story of the faith and in this sense there is continuity. But this identity must not be held at the expense of *metanoia.* In terms of change, identity can never reach its end, for true Christian identity will only be fully disclosed in the future. The eschatological beyond is what provides Christian identity with its dynamism and capacity to be centred in, and open to, change.[33]

3.2 Identity in conversion and implications for Confessional traditions

The *Groupe des Dombes* take up the theme of conversion in relation to the churches of the Reformation that take a Confession as the means to affirm identity.[34] When elements, other than dialogical relationship with God, influence the formation of a confession, then people can be set against one another in what the *Groupe des Dombes* would consider to be self-justifying *confessionalisme*. The *Groupe des Dombes* thus usefully employ two words to express the negative and positive dynamics in confessional traditions. They distinguish between *confessionalisme*, which withdraws from its context failing to confront contextual realities and thereby defending itself against change, and confessional allegiance, or *confessionalité*, which acknowledges the historical roots brought to the dialogue to enrich it but is always ready to receive the richness of other traditions.[35] In this way *confessionalité* lives in continuity with the past but remains ready to change, not setting itself against others but more clearly focusing on a process of continuing reformation.[36]

This can be seen in the formulation of *The Westminster Confession*. Professor John Thompson, a Reformed theologian, minister and now retired lecturer at the Presbyterian College, Belfast, recognises that there are many influences which form a confession of faith and which result in historically particular pronouncements:

> As at the Reformation the main concern of the Assembly was to reform the Church and its doctrines in accordance with the Word of God, but, as always, political, cultural, philosophical influences, as well as biblical, moulded their thinking and partially at any rate determined their biblical interpretation.[37]

It is interesting here to note that the historical factors influencing the writing of *The Westminster Confession* arose from the close relationship between the Church and the State.[38] Discomfort in some sections of the Church caused unrest throughout the country. The Assembly of Divines was convened by Parliament to settle religious fears and the consequent political unrest. Those in the Reformed tradition sought safeguards in the law of the land. Ironically, the Assembly was later to reject the right of Parliament to convene such Assemblies.

The safeguarding of loyalty to God was given into the care of the state, which took a leadership role in convening the meeting of Divines. This affected *The Westminster Confession*, demonstrating that doctrinal factors are not the only influences that shape the construction of a confession. Historical and cultural dynamics also play a role. Ethnic identity and confessional identity cannot always be kept separate.

The *Groupe des Dombes* challenge those taking up confessional approaches to identity with a more inclusive understanding of Christian identity which involves constant conversion to the Christ. A more inclusive understanding of Christian identity calls for a new relationship with other 'denominations', which will be the subject of the fourth chapter, and also for a new relationship with the world, which I shall take up in Chapter Four. In considering whose the Church is and in understanding conversion to be at the very heart of Christian identity, it is enough to note that the *Groupe des Dombes* call the churches into a dialogue which will include discussion about the relationship between confessional and Christian identity.

This dialogue is not a forum for self-justifying confessionalism but one for open discussion, which permits confessional allegiance to be confronted with allegiance to God

that is above all other allegiances. The *Groupe des Dombes* invite the churches to allow loyalty to God to stand in critique of all other loyalties. This invitation is to stand firmly in one's own confessional identity, thereby demonstrating continuity, and to live the parallel commitment to receive 'light from any quarter'.[39] Change is thus placed alongside continuity. Conversion becomes the key in authentic Christian identity. It is the key to understanding relationship to a God who is freely self-revealing and who can never be fully known. It is a necessary hermeneutical key in the continual recognition and critique of ethnic and other allegiances.

3.3 Challenges in the Northern Irish context

In Ireland *The Faith and Politics Group* reflect the challenge to a more inclusive understanding of Christian identity in the context of violence and where exclusive claims are made:

> Christian faith challenges all exclusive claims of tribe, tradition and political commitment. The Gospel invites us into the space created by Christ, and to find there those who were previously our enemies. It therefore breaks down the enmity between us: enmity caused by different traditions, and national, political and religious loyalties.[40]

In the political context of Northern Ireland, primary loyalty to God raises questions for both Irish Nationalists and British Unionists. For the person whose pre-eminent fidelity is to God, other loyalties are questioned and must be examined. This kind of questioning also arises from among those who would not call themselves 'Christian', through their desire for moral integrity. Unionists and Nationalists both have to ask whether or not the state to which they belong, or aspire to belong to, will infringe their overarching loyalty. It seems to me that only if belonging to such a state infringes on belonging to God is there a question of opposition to the state arrangements.

Whether this can be unqualified opposition, meaning violent opposition, is quite another matter. Belonging to God also involves those things that God desires for the world, for example justice and peace.[41] These theological imperatives too must be brought to bear on decisions regarding allegiance. If loyalty to God is used to justify injustice, conflict or war then it runs counter to God's being and will for the world, and questions have to be asked.

Loyalty to God, therefore, questions every place of belonging and any attempt to protect those places of belonging in a way that contradicts God's will for the world. In 1988 the PCI's doctrine committee brought a report to the General Assembly to help Presbyterians and Roman Catholics better understand one another. This report may be viewed as providing an opportunity for critical reflection on belonging to God through the honest search to understand others. The intention of the report was not to obscure differences, but it was clearly recognised that:

> ... the true nature of these differences is not always accurately recognised nor the extent of what we hold in common, and this often gives rise to bigoted half-truths being accepted as fact.[42]

The report reflects the view that allegiances which are not critiqued in light of encounter with others can stunt the growing sense of identity that the faith community finds in core fidelity to God. *The Faith and Politics Group* couch the call to identity in God through conversion, in terms of the call of the kingdom:

> Central to the call of the Kingdom is the invitation to conversion, to admit one's sins, to turn away from them, to find forgiveness and to become part of the community of the Kingdom.[43]

This is an ongoing process in a context where other kingdoms, in Northern Ireland the kingdoms of loyalism, unionism, nationalism or republicanism, reassert themselves, dividing people from one another and inviting compromised loyalty to God.[44] It is under the theological banner of conversion that the Christian community engages in questioning every place and sense of belonging as those places needing conversion are changed, reformed or abandoned. Thereby a fuller sense of belonging to the Christian community and the shared understanding of primary loyalty to God will be attained.

4. Identity in conversion: a view from scripture

4.1 Scriptural discourse on ethnic belonging within the world of grace

Conversion is the core of Christian identity, *semper reformanda*, in response to the Spirit. Understood in this way, conversion or change of mind, heart and life is not a threat to Christian identity but essential both in forming that identity and as a component of that identity. H. Richard Niebuhr, in his classical study of Christian applications of loyalty to God throughout history,[45] defines the relationship of Christ to culture, or as I have put it of loyalty to God above all other loyalties, as 'the enduring problem'.[46] Drawing on Paul's affirmation in the letter to the Galatians, Niebuhr applies scripture, so important in the commitment of the Reformed churches to *sola scriptura*, and concludes that:

> To make our decisions in faith is to make them in view of the fact that no single man or group or historical time is the church; but that there is a church of faith in which we do our partial, relative work and in which we count. It is to make them in view of the fact that Christ is risen from the dead, and not only the head of the church but the redeemer of the world. It is to make them in view of the fact that the world of culture – man's achievement – exists within the world of grace – God's Kingdom.[47]

In Galatians the point at issue was whether or not Gentiles had to become Jews before they could call themselves 'Christian'. Paul stands firm in his conviction that justification is by faith in Christ and not by the performance of any ritual or activity. The rituals and activities may, critically, become matters of culture rather than signs of salvation. In his engagement with the debate Paul affirmed culture, in all its complexity, as the arena of God's grace, and that no culture, people or ethnic group exists outside the world of grace. Each, from their culture or group, must encounter and be transformed by grace. The relationship of the Christian community, culture and the challenges of taking account of culture will be further discussed in the next chapter. The emphasis here is that God and God's grace are not limited to one group of people, including any religious grouping:

> ... for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3 vv26-29)

Useful insights into God's grace and into understanding loyalty to God in places where there is cultural competition are provided by the Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf.

4.2 A Reformed view from Croatia

As a theologian in the Reformed tradition, Miroslav Volf, born in Croatia and therefore aware of the effects of ethnic competition, turns back to scripture to view how God relates to culture. He takes up the theme of identity, belonging and competing allegiance in relation to the Abrahamic covenant.

Abraham's decision to go where God was leading, even though that place was unknown to him, was a decision to leave culture and family behind. Loyalty to God was not only set above other loyalties, it also affirmed a God who could be discovered in every culture, family and people. Volf emphasises the fact that belonging to God not only rises above belonging to anything or anyone else but it also calls the community of believers to critically rearrange already existing loyalties. As God can be found in every culture and place so Christian people should be open to discover the God who is made known everywhere:

> At the very core of Christian identity lies an all-encompassing change of loyalty, from a given culture with its gods to the God of all cultures. A response to a call from that God entails rearrangement of a whole network of allegiances.[48]

The community of faith may be understood not only as heirs to God's promises to Abraham but also to Abraham's learning that God is the God of every culture, family and nation. The God who transcends all things, including cultural and national difference, requires steadfast loyalty. Loyalty to God is a yardstick against which all other loyalties must be measured. Fidelity to God requires commitment to a constant critique of all other loyalties. Constant reflective critique requires guidance which, for the church, is found within the pages of scripture. Volf's argument, therefore, may be limited by the fact that scripture has not precluded the Church from dominating others or from favouring one culture over another. Such moments in the history of the Church have stood out against the inclusive dynamic which Volf seeks through his explication of God as the God of all cultures. How scripture functions as a guide for the churches is the subject of the next chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, Volf assists in understanding how the Christian community can view God as above and beyond their own

culture while at the same time holding on to their own sense of cultural belonging.

Volf's call to the churches is not only to critique their competing political and ethnic allegiances, but also a call to set out from one's own culture to discover God in other cultures. It is an invitation to experience how God is interpreted and understood within other cultures and to examine the hermeneutical assumptions of one's own culture. Those same hermeneutical assumptions also affect how culturally bound Christians read scripture. There remains, however, a question regarding how scripture is read, given that the Church has not been exempt from tendencies towards domination or to favouring one culture over another.[49] Taking scripture seriously involves a concern to be aware of the various hermeneutical assumptions with which scripture is approached.

4.3 Hermeneutics, suspicion and taking scripture seriously

In hermeneutics what is at issue is how to approach the text of scripture. Hermeneutics should be particularly important to those who hold a high view of scripture. The lens through which scripture is read both assists, by helping to apply scripture to context, and resists, by blinding the reader to other insights gleaned by a different hermeneutical approach, the interpretation and application of the text. So, for example, a church using a hermeneutic of dominance and exclusivism, could turn to Matthew 10:34 for support:

> Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

On the other hand, a church using a hermeneutic of peacemaking, turns more easily to Matthew 5:9:

> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

The commitment to *sola scriptura*, as it stands within the Reformed tradition, involves a hermeneutical challenge. Throughout this thesis I use a hermeneutic of suspicion towards any text that appears to justify domination or exclusion by the Church as it may then be used to support ethnic domination and foment conflict. The hermeneutic of suspicion must, however, be accompanied with a hermeneutic of retrieval if what is good in history is not to be overlooked. That of which we are sometimes suspicious may have the possibility of being retrieved into a tradition in new and liberating ways. Writing about anti-Catholicism in Ireland, for example, Brewer and Higgins critically reflect on the view that Ulster Protestants are purportedly modern-day Israelites.[50] This self-understanding, developed in conjunction with a particular reading of scripture, has led to the belief among some that Ulster is God's gift and so it is possible to stand for God and Ulster. Brewer and Higgins note some of the implications of this belief:

> It follows further that these ideas legitimate the dominance of the chosen elect. The Irish natives were the heathen, the evil Canaanites, those whom God has not called to salvation.[51]

A careful hermeneutic of suspicion is called for when scripture is understood to be 'replete with allegories and prophecies relevant to Ulster'.[52] Such a hermeneutic of suspicion enables us to ask what distinctive Christian witness can be given in a world experiencing ethnic conflict, where God and scripture can be drawn in to support one side or another.

Feminist theologians are particularly aware of the significance of a hermeneutic of suspicion and they point to its value in this context. Using a hermeneutic of suspicion they

have addressed texts that appear to justify patriarchy, in an attempt to demythologize patriarchy. By raising women, already within the tradition, to the level of visibility, feminists have asked important hermeneutical questions for the whole theological tradition. They are not adding to the text, but looking more closely to see what is there. Feminists propose an alternative vision, emanating from the text when it is approached with a hermeneutic of suspicion.[53]

Feminists have shown how important dialogue with the text is for the faith community in search of self-definition and the struggle to live in allegiance to God. The struggle requires that proof-text approaches alone are insufficient, but must be balanced with an understanding of the context.[54] In Matthew 10:34, mentioned above, what is at issue is affirmation or denial of Christ. Owning Christ publicly will not always be a matter of ease but may induce conflict and lack of understanding. It may even be viewed as a sell-out or betrayal of family, friends or ethnic identity. Loyalty to God above all other loyalties raises many questions, not least questions about whom Christians might betray and with whom loyalty lies.

A hermeneutic of suspicion seeks to look behind the text to what is going on in the writer's context, attempting to adduce the hermeneutic of the writer and, therefore, the intention of the author. Paul Ricoeur believes that a hermeneutic of suspicion unveils a new power in the text:

> ... the power of the text to disclose new possibilities offers an expanded view of the world and a deeper capacity for selfhood.[55]

To take seriously the field of hermeneutics is, therefore, to take the text seriously and allow it, in dialogue with both writer and Christian community, to open doors of

understanding that will shape Christian loyalty in fidelity to the scriptures. This will be the theme of the next chapter.

5. Conclusion: Loyalty to God relativizes all other loyalties.

In this chapter I have argued that culture influences shape the Christian community but that this must be critiqued and adjudicated by the principle of loyalty to God. Before turning to Irish Presbyterian history to illustrate and examine this argument, I shall draw together the ideas contained within the sections of this chapter. I argued that in situations of division and conflict, such as those which pertain in Northern Ireland, it is insufficient for the Christian community simply to reflect these divisions, given that Christians share a common allegiance and belonging to God. To effectively witness in a divided context the Christian community is faced with the dual challenge of living loyalty to God in a manner that relativizes all other loyalties and of identifying and confronting those other loyalties. I employed insights from the Reformed, Roman Catholic and ecumenical traditions to develop an appropriate hermeneutic of awareness and to offer critique of the demands for loyalty placed upon people in situations where there is cultural competition, emphasising the need for a scriptural discourse. Scripture is employed in support of the adjudicating principle of loyalty to God; it is enhanced by insights from the Reformation, particularly connections Calvin makes between allegiance to God and righteousness. I acknowledged that ethnic identity and belonging are complex matters and powerful in shaping identity but that belonging to God, as the core place of belonging for the Christian community, challenges the dynamic to exclude or separate from those who are ethnically different. I also recognised the dangers of applying the adjudicating principle as it can tend to the very exclusivism it seeks to rise above and resist.

The evangelical emphasis on the transcendence of God, who is freely self-revealing, helps resist dynamics of exclusion and separation. The Church cannot therefore, domesticate God for the Church belongs to God; it does not own God. Understanding loyalty to God requires an ongoing, dialogical relationship with God. This idea is particularly pertinent in a context where loyalty is interpreted as 'no change' because dialogical relationship with God assumes change on the part of the Christian community.

Insights from the *Groupe des Dombes* are particularly illuminating in the examination of the tension between change and no change, in their emphasis on continuity with the tradition, and change enlivened by eschatology. Both change and truth are essential aspects of Christian identity. Conversion is the theological key to support the argument that change is core to Christian identity. When viewed in this way change is not a threat to Christian loyalty but a key element of it.

Loyalty to God, therefore, is always on the move as a result of dialogical encounter with the transcendent God who invites a reordering of all other loyalties. In this sense, the people of God are a pilgrim people, learning as the Hebrews learned, how to reorder their lives in relationship with God. The Church belongs first of all, and above all else, to God. It is to God that the Church is continually being converted in a process of learning how to live in steadfast loyalty to God; that loyalty critiques commitment to all other loyalties. This process of conversion is what *The Westminster Confession* calls, 'sanctification':

> This sanctification is throughout the whole man, yet imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part: whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war; the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.[56]

Sanctification acknowledges imperfection, manifest in every kind of living that falls short of identity formed and sustained in belonging to God. Ethnic identity falls under the microscope of loyalty to God. So too must confessional identity. It is in application that loyalty to God moves beyond academic study and becomes real in the life of the Church. As Niebuhr notes:

> ... the problem of Christ and culture can and must come to an end only in a realm beyond all study in the free decisions of individual believers and responsible communities.[57]

How the Church is sanctified is a matter for the next chapter, which takes up the issue of how to read scripture and considers the challenges to the church of reading scripture in a particular context. The chapter will examine whether this is, in fact, a valid approach for the Church. Before coming to those issues I will pause to reflect, within the context of a significant time in Irish Presbyterian history, on how some Presbyterians did live in loyalty to God when lesser, though pressing, political loyalties made significant demands on their lives.

[1] Anton Houtepen, *People of God: A Plea for the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1984) pviii.

[2] As cited in Anton Houtepen, *People of God: A Plea For The Church,* pviii. Trivial atheism may be defined as people looking to the church for the provision of rites of passage without feeling any compulsion to take on the accompanying responsibility. So, for example, baptism performs a social function but promises made at baptism have little impact on those who make them. Instead of becoming a place of belonging the Church becomes a provider of services and so it fails to shape identity effectively.

[3] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *New Pathways*: *Developing a Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Faith and Politics Group, 1997) p23. In his reflections on the gods of our age and his explication of how they function, Walter Wink describes, in terms similar to the Faith and Politics Group, how gods take on or are invested with inappropriate divine qualities, '... they are potentiated as autonomous powers, They become disobedient to the divine will, possessing us with all the irresistible force of a neurotic complex or a political obsession.' Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) p126. H. Richard Niebuhr considers the issue in relation to the absolutizing of political systems and argues that, '[w]hen the divine absolute is acknowledged,' all other absolutes become, 'dangerous usurpers of the Kingdom of God.' 'Religion and the democratic tradition,' H. Richard Niebuhr ed. William Stacy Johnson, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished* Writing (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996) p149.

[4] Exodus 20 v3.

[5] Calvin further makes the point that Christians are not only to flee from espousing other gods but in situations where there is the possibility of other gods taking the place of God, then clear obedience to and observance of God are to be actively pursued. 'It is not enough to refrain from other gods. We must, at the same time, devote ourselves wholly to him, not acting like certain impious despisers, who regard it as the shortest method, to hold all religious observance in derision.' John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983) Chapter II, Paragraph VIII.16.

[6] 'Observe what I command you today. See, I will drive out before you the Amorites the Canaanites, the Hitties, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going, or it will become a snare among you. You shall tear down their altars, break their pillars, and cut down their sacred poles (for you shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.' Exodus 34 vv11-14.

[7] 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.' Exodus 20 vv2-3. The commandment is reaffirmed in Exodus 34 v14.

[8] Rita Burns, 'The Book of Exodus', in, *Concilium 189: Exodus: a Lasting Paradigm* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987) p19.

[9] 'The first duty of subjects towards their rulers, is to entertain the most honourable views of their office, recognising it as a delegated jurisdiction from God, and on that account receiving and reverencing them as the ministers and ambassadors of God.' John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Chapter IV, Paragraph XX.22.

[10] 'But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees the commands must yield, to whose majesty the sceptres must bow.' Ibid. Chapter IV, Paragraph XX.32.

[11] Ibid. Chapter IV, Paragraph XX.32.
[12] 'The great point, then, is that we are consecrated and dedicated to God, and therefore should not henceforth think, speak, design, or act, without a view to his glory.' Ibid. Chapter III, Paragraph VII.1.
[13] 'If the Lord adopts us for his sons on the condition that our whole life be a representation of Christ, the bond of our adoption, then, unless we dedicate and devote ourselves to righteousness, we not only, with the utmost perfidy, revolt from our Creator, but also abjure the Saviour himself.' Ibid. Chapter III, Paragraph VI.3.
[14] 'Man, when he withdrew his allegiance to God, was deprived of the spiritual gifts by which he had been raised to the hope of eternal salvation.' Ibid. Chapter II, Paragraph II.12.
[15] Ethnicity is a complex concept defined in a variety of ways. The word itself is taken from the Greek word *ethnos* meaning people or nation. Vamik Volkan is a psychiatrist with special interest in bringing psychoanalytic theory to bear on international relations. He was born to a Turkish family in Cyprus and is the founder of the Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction at the University of Virginia. He records some of the ways in which ethnicity has been defined. The anthropologist, George de Vos, sees ethnic identity as being shared by those with a common tradition that is not shared with the others with whom that group comes into contact. This shared tradition is built up from religious belief and practice, place of origin, history, language, or ancestry. Howard Stein, also an anthropologist, believes that ethnicity is more about a way of thinking than about a category of nature. While physical characteristics, for example, may play a part it is separate histories, cultures, or religions that provide ethnic identity. Volkan also notes that sometimes ethnic identity can be coterminous with national identity. Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997) pp21-23. In *Ethnicity and Power in the Contemporary World*, it is noted that some have replaced the notion of ethnicity with that of identity, Kumar Rupesinghe & Valery Tishkov eds. (New York: United Nations University Press, 1996) p13ff. Sudhir Kakar, a psychoanalyst interested in Hindu/Muslim relationships, speaks of ethnicity as group image which is passed on through myth, history, ideals, values, or shared cultural symbols. Sudhir Kakar, *The Colours of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion and Conflict* (Chicago: University Press, 1996) pixf.
[16] Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) p299.
[17] Vamik Volkan calls ethnicity which manifests itself like neo-racism, 'ethnocentrism.' Vamik Volkan, *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism,* p23.
[18] Ibid. p21. 'Conditions of modernity give rise to ethnicity and make identity a powerful symbol of meaning and worth. Present-day ethnic conflicts have a scope and intensity that did not exist earlier.' Kumar Rupesinghe & Valery Tishkov eds., *Ethnicity and Power in the Contemporary World,* p13. Sometimes ethnic allegiance can lead to bizarre behaviour. In 1988, following the earthquake in Soviet Armenia, the Soviets collected blood for the many Armenian victims. Blood was also collected from the Azerbaijanis. During the Soviet period tension between Armenians and Azerbaijani's had been largely suppressed but with *perestroika* and *glasnost* those latent tensions found room to breathe. By the time of the earthquake tension had risen to such a point that Armenians would rather die than accept the 'contaminating' Azerbaijani blood. Vamik Volkan *Blood Lines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*, p5.

[19] In any particular context of sectarian conflict an eye must be kept on what is going on across the world for sectarianism is a universal problem. It cannot be separated from, nor understood apart from, its consequences. Joseph Liechty, 'The Nature of Sectarianism Today,' Trevor Williams & Alan Falconer eds., *Sectarianism: Papers of the 1994 Corrymeela Ecumenical Conference* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1995) p11ff.

[20] It is not possible, within the scope of this thesis, to provide a comprehensive overview of Ireland's history. However, some significant dates and times are worth noting. There is no good place to begin for each step backwards takes the reader of history into an historical labyrinth. The Elizabethan conquest, 1558-1603, saw the inability of the English crown to lay claim to Ireland. Queen Elizabeth, like her father Henry VIII, was advised that there would only be security in the realm when Irish discontent was settled. The policy to subdue Ireland led to nine years of war. Even at the end of war the English victors remained afraid that Catholic leaders would rise to power. In Ireland, the Elizabethan conquest was followed by a Jacobite plantation, mainly in Ulster, which permitted planter and Ulster-Irish, to live alongside one another, The settlement with England was not, however, stable and in 1641 the planters fell prey to the discontent of the Ulster-Irish. Ireland became embroiled in the English Civil War but following the Restoration, experienced calm, the revival of economic interests, and prosperity. However, 'The accession of a Catholic King, James II, in 1685 sent tremors of alarm not only through the length and breadth of England but also through the Protestant settlement in Ireland.' Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992) p149. The resulting Williamite Wars concluded with the triumph of William of Orange. There followed a relatively long period of peace in Ireland but with the imposing of the Penal Laws it was not for Catholics in particular, but also for Dissenters, a period of contentment. Discontent led to the United Irish Rebellion of 1798 and the subsequent Act of Union 1800. After the Act of Union Dissenters found themselves in a more favourable position than their Catholic neighbours and so Dissenters gradually became more closely identified with government in London and less with the aspiration for government in Dublin. Catholic discontent led to the Ulster Crisis of 1890-1920. Ongoing sectarian skirmishes, Republican war on the British State, Loyalist fear of Home Rule and a steady political movement towards Home Rule for Ireland brought a border to Ireland leaving six counties under British Rule and twenty six under Irish Rule. The drawing of the border was to consolidate the Unionist majority in the North of Ireland. Frank Wright comments that, '[i]n Northern Ireland the peculiar institutions established after 1920 were designed to secure control over areas with nationalist majorities. The gerrymandered local government institutions replaced commissioners who had been put in to run nationalist councils that did not recognise Northern Ireland. The mechanism depended on gerrymandering electoral boundaries to convert Catholic majorities into Unionist majorities on local councils.' Frank Wright, *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987) p114. Since the drawing of the border in 1921, unrest in Ireland has focused on the border – whether to keep it or erase it – and that discontent has largely been situated in the six Northern counties. In Northern Ireland the Troubles began in 1969 and arguably ended with the paramilitary cease-fires of 1994. The focus for this ongoing sectarian conflict was again the border – to uphold it or to unite Ireland under Irish Rule. Only a few have entertained the notion of uniting Ireland under British Rule. Alignments and divisions are much more complex in today's Northern Ireland since the signing of the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement in 1998 and the formation of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly.

[21] For example, in the Christian World Communions such as the Lutheran World Federation or the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Councils of Churches such as the World Council of Churches.
[22] I first heard this idea used by Duncan Morrow at a conference at the Corrymeela Community of Reconciliation, Ballycastle, Northern Ireland in 1996, sponsored jointly be the Irish School of Ecumenics and The Corrymeela Community.
[23] *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1979) Chapter XXV, Paragraph 1.
[24] 'Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church' paragraph 9 Austin Flannery O.P. ed., Vatican *Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1995) p13f.
[25] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter II, Paragraph 2.
[26] Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction (*London: Fontana, 1963) pp12ff. Barth makes four affirmations: 1.That God is self-revealing and transcendent. 2.That God reveals Godself and confronts humanity. This revelation which confronts us is interpreted by faith. 3.That the object of revelation is God. 4.That God is not absolute. While there is no one equal to God, God exists in relationship with humanity. This relationship is one of love freely given which calls a free response of love from us.
[27] The Corrymeela Community of Reconciliation was founded before the Troubles in Northern Ireland began. The community has persisted in offering an alternative place of meeting and providing opportunity for reflection on Northern Ireland's divided society.
[28] The Irish School of Ecumenics is an academic institute, based in Dublin but also with a Belfast campus, and concerned with the whole spectrum of ecumenical activity and learning. One of its recent projects in Northern Ireland, 'Moving Beyond Sectarianism', has resulted in publications and continuing adult and youth education programmes. The School has always been particularly aware of the situation in Northern Ireland and has sought to contribute to the process of increasing understanding.
[29] Joseph Liechty, 'Historical and Theological Origins of Sectarianism', Trevor Williams & Alan Falconer eds., *Sectarianism: Papers of the 1994 Corrymeela Ecumenical Conference,* p45. The challenge to the churches is pertinently put by Liechty and Clegg, 'In Northern Ireland, few interventions can raise the emotional temperature of a conversation so sharply as bringing up the topic of sectarianism ... In fact, maintaining civil conversation usually means not discussing sectarianism at all, ...' , Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2001) p9.
[30] Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) p18.
[31] The Abbé Paul Couturier formed the *Groupe des Dombes* in 1937. An independent ecumenical group, they meet annually and attempt to articulate ecumenical insights in written publications.
[32] The Groupe des Dombes, *For The Conversion of the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993) p17.
[33] 'A living identity is never in fact perfected: it is always under construction. Only the future will disclose our identity conclusively.' Ibid. p7.
[34] Confession in this sense is a weightier designation than denomination for it seeks not only to represent identity but also to define it. 'Confessional identity lies in a specific historically, culturally and doctrinally located way of living out ecclesial identity and Christian identity. ... This identity is not only defined by theological characteristics and the marks of ecclesial structure; it also has to do with liturgical life, expressions of personal devotion and moral stances.' Ibid. p23.

[35] Ibid. p24.
[36] 'Confessionalism, also called 'denominationalism', withdraws into itself and rejects real confrontation with other confessions and denominations.' Ibid. p24.
[37] John Thompson, 'The Westminster Confession', *Challenge & Conflict: Essays in Irish Presbyterian History and Doctrine* (Antrim: W & G Baird, 1981) p6.
[38] 'On the one hand King Charles I claiming the divine right of Kings and as Head of the Church of England met the assertion of Parliament of its rights against him leading to civil war and disorder. On the other hand the attempt of Charles with the support of Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to impose a High Church uniformity of ritual, ceremony and government on the Churches led to great dissatisfaction, opposition and fears of Roman practices.' Ibid. p4.
[39] *The Code* of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Section III, Paragraph II states, 'It is the privilege, right and duty of every man to examine the Scriptures for himself, and he is bound to submit to their authority. Having formed a definite conviction as to what the will of God is upon any subject, it is his duty to accept and obey it. In exercising the inalienable right of private judgement the Christian is not to set his reason above the Word of God, or to refuse light from any quarter.' *The Code: The Book of Government of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (Belfast: Church House, 1980, reprinted with amendments 1997) p10.
[29] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Breaking Down the Enmity: Faith & Politics in the Northern Ireland Conflict (*Belfast: Shanway Distributors, 1993) p10.
[41] Amos 5 vv14-15: 'Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.'
[42] *Agreements and Disagreements of Irish Presbyterians and Roman Catholics: A Report to the General Assembly by the Doctrine Committee, June 1988*, p1.
[43] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Breaking Down the Enmity: Faith & Politics in the Northern Ireland Conflict,* p37.
[44] 'The barriers that separate the two main sections of our population cannot be easily removed or surmounted. Numerous cultural, political and religious differences distinguish Irish Presbyterians and Roman Catholics.' *Agreements and Disagreements of Irish Presbyterians and Roman Catholics: A Report to the General Assembly by the doctrine committee, June 1988*, p1.
[45] Niebuhr lists and explores a variety of stances on culture, which have been taken up by the churches. Christ has been understood to be opposed to culture, in agreement with culture, fulfilling and restoring culture, as requiring obedience to culture or as calling for a change of culture arising from involvement within it. He notes that because both Christ and Culture are complex realities there needs to be ongoing dialogue between the two. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) p43ff.
[46] Ibid., p1.
[47] Ibid., p256.
[48] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) p40.
[49] For example, in the missionary zeal of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Western European cultural practices were exported and planted in other cultures giving the impression that one culture was superior to another.

[50] This is the view that Ulster Protestants are among the 'loyal sons of Judah' and from this it follows that God has chosen Ulster. 'It follows, therefore, that Ulster is a modern Israel, God's gift of land to His people as their source of prosperity. In biblical times Israel had to be fought for and protected from the faithless. ... The same applies to Ulster.' John D. Brewer with Gareth I. Higgins, *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland, 1600-1998: The Mote and the Beam* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998) p136.
[51] Ibid. p136.
[52] Ibid. p136.
[53] 'All forms of feminism have in common the proposal of an alternative vision of life in this world.' Sandra M. Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991) p25.
[54] In his study of Christianity and its relationship to war and peace, Roland Bainton uses a threefold typology to elucidate the various responses which the Christian community has made: Withdrawal, qualified participation and dominance. This typology can be used to illustrate the variety of ways in which Christian communities respond in relationship to the state as a structure of power. He comments that: 'From every theological position divergent ethical applications have been declared.' Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960) p238.
[55] Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring The Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) p8.
[56] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XIII, Paragraph 2.
[57] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p233.

CHAPTER 2 BEGINNING IN BELONGING

PART II: A conversation with history

The United Irishmen and Ulster Presbyterian Radicalism

1. The Conversation

No other period in Irish Presbyterian history more adequately demonstrates the magnetic power of political allegiance and cultural influences than that of the United Irishmen and the United Irish Rebellion of 1798. The dynamic power of political allegiance is all the more clear when we recall that Irish Presbyterians found themselves on both sides of a bitter, and ultimately bloody dispute, each side as determined and committed as the other. This period in Irish history illustrates the difficulties of negotiating loyalty to God in a manner that throws all other loyalties into relief. Loyalty to God does not, as the Presbyterian clergy involved in the 1798 Rebellion show, purge all other loyalties, an argument firmly made by Steel Dickson in his sermon, as Moderator, to the June meeting to the General Synod of Ulster (hereafter the Synod), 1781:

> ... religion is not connected with politics, as an equal, much less as a dependent. Every argument which proves that God hath a right to govern the world: and that Revelation comes from God, proves also, that the principles of Revelation should regulate the counsels and designs of men; and that human laws can never justify measures, which those of God condemn.[1]

The Presbyterian clergy of '98 were zealous in their commitment, politics being important as the title of the selection of Steel Dickson's writings, *Scripture Politics*, implies. I have chosen Presbyterians in Ulster, and specifically within the Synod,[2] for this conversation with history precisely because of their dedication to a political cause. In this section I will examine the roots of Presbyterian radicalism

and the context which influenced Presbyterian ministers to get involved in the United Irish cause. I will adduce Rev. James Porter, Greyabbey, and Rev. Dr. William Steel Dickson as focal points, but will refer to the lives of others. Porter was hanged for his involvement, while Steel Dickson finished his days a Presbyterian minister, retired from the congregation of Keady. This ability to remain inside the life of a politically divided church is, I will argue, an expression of living loyalty to God that is above all other loyalties. At the same time I am careful not to imply simplicity, for the myriad of influences shaping identity are not easily negotiated around obligations of loyalty to God.

2. The roots of Presbyterian radicalism

Presbyterian radicalism can be traced back to the American Revolution, which began in April 1775 when the first shots were fired at Lexington Green, Massachusetts. That conflict was to last until 1783, precipitating an Imperial Crisis for the British Empire. In the light of the American Revolution British subjects reflected on the benefits, or otherwise, of membership of the Empire. Among Presbyterians in Ulster there was a fear that should Britain subjugate the American colonists, they would further subjugate Presbyterian subjects, and indeed their Catholic neighbours, in Ireland. Fears of subjugation, coupled with family ties,[3] were to shape Presbyterian sympathy for the cause of the American colonists, and reopen intra-Protestant division at home.[4]

The year of American Independence was the year of a General Election in Ireland. The position of the Dissenters, that is the Presbyterians, was such that they were barred from voting since the 1774 Parliament Act. Their fervour was fuelled as they saw themselves paying tax but having no representation, and so the seeds of radicalism took root. Those roots were not destroyed by the repeal of the Parliament Act in 1776 and Irish Presbyterians found

themselves to be a potent force in Irish politics.[5] Marianne Elliott notes the power that Presbyterians had in the eyes of various governments, for, '[s]uccessive governments saw them as the most volatile element in Irish society, more dangerous even than the Catholics.'[6] As an educated group, Irish Presbyterian ministers were in touch with radical thinking of the time and were free to spread such views through their pulpit ministry.[7]

The democratic nature of the Presbyterian structure was also to fuel radical tendencies. The structure of Presbyterianism has always been democratic, ministers (clergy) and elders (laity) both holding power within the structure at Presbytery, Synod and nowadays at the General Assembly. Presbyterians were, therefore, naturally disposed by their ecclesiastical structure to democratic politics. This, together with a staunch commitment to Christ as the sole King and head of the Church, influenced their understanding of Church-State relationships. For Presbyterians the State has no final jurisdiction over the Church under the headship of Christ. Clashes with temporal powers have always, therefore, been viewed as inevitable.[8] It might be said that such clashes were inevitable given Calvin's connection between allegiance to God and righteousness referred to in Chapter One, Section 2.2. Among Ulster Presbyterians the New Light party, of whom more will be said in the next chapter, was the first to energize democratic ideals. The New Light party, who were not in favour of subscription to *The Westminster Confession* and were considered to be of liberal theology, was in the ascendancy in the second half of the eighteenth century, taking their vision from movements leading to the French Revolution in 1780. They were pivotal in shaping Presbyterian radicalism in the eighteenth century.

But all of three of these influences, the American Revolution, ecclesiastical structure, and the French Revolution, would have had considerably less impact if it

had not been for a fourth, the social and economic power relations that obtained in eighteenth century Ireland. McBride emphasises how crucial such conditions were in shaping radicalism among Ulster Presbyterians.

> Ulster radicalism cannot be understood outside the experience of exclusion from the institutions of the state, the social conditions of the north of Ireland, and a deep-seated ambivalence towards a British government which was both the upholder of Anglican ascendancy and the ultimate guarantor of Protestant security.[9]

Those espousing a spectrum of theologies within Ulster Presbyterianism found themselves united in a common discontent with the social and economic arrangements of the day. So crucial are those arrangements that they deserve a section on their own. To an examination of these arrangements I will now turn.

3. Social and economic conditions in eighteenth century Ireland

In eighteenth century Ireland one eighth of the population were Anglican, most of them living in Dublin. Yet it was this group, the 'Protestant Ascendancy', that held the monopoly of wealth and social power. In England they occupied the three hundred Irish seats in the House of Commons; in Ireland they served as jurors and magistrates. This group has often been represented as homogenous and united. In fact, the Ascendancy themselves knew internal division for it was landed property that guaranteed power. Not all Anglicans had equal access to political power, and so, '[t]he dominance of the Irish élite thus rested on a combination of religion, ethnicity, and social status.'[10] The Ascendancy kept their power through a combination of the law, their anti-papist ideology, and the stirring up of sectarian unrest at local level. They were known to portray Presbyterians as papists, after a kind.[11] The pillars of the

Ascendancy were their privileged position enshrined in law, their connection with the Established Church and their anti-popery.

Catholics in Ireland were dominated by the penal code. Under the Registry Act the work of priests was restricted, Catholic schools were prohibited, pilgrimages to holy wells were banned, and in 1697 bishops and those in holy orders were expelled from Ireland. This can be interpreted as a serious attempt to dismantle the Roman Catholic Church, as priests could not be ordained without a bishop. Locally, however, magistrates were unwilling to enforce these laws and the Roman Catholic Church was to survive.[12]

On the economic side, Catholics had been hit by a series of laws since 1695 that were aimed at dismantling the Catholic land-owning class. Statistics show some of the effects of these laws, for whereas in 1688 twenty two percent of the land was owned by Catholics; in 1704 they owned only eighteen percent. Some of this can be explained by the fact that, in order to maintain their land, some Catholics defected to the Established Church. Trading was open to all denominations; however, many Catholics turned to trading and a Catholic merchant class developed. Exclusion of Catholics from the world of politics remained.[13]

This exclusion was the deepest grievance of the Catholic community. Membership of Parliament, municipal corporations, the magistracy and the legal profession were all closed to Catholics. In 1728 they were fully disenfranchised and knew that further parliamentary reform could only take place without their representation and influence. Politically, Catholics found leadership among the gentry and urban middle class and in 1759 the Catholic Committee was founded in Dublin. By a series of events following the formation of the committee, a number of Relief Acts were passed. But, as with their Presbyterian neighbours, measures

came too late to lead to conciliation. Catholic appetites had been whetted for full Catholic emancipation.

Ulster Presbyterians had known a measure of prosperity in the seventeenth century, but like their Catholic neighbours they were dissatisfied with the continuing political and social arrangements.[14] Both lived with the consequences of the 1704 Test Act, although this was later relaxed for Presbyterians,[15] which barred them from holding office under the Crown if they did not take communion in the Established Church, something no conscientious Presbyterian could do.[16]

By the late eighteenth century Belfast had become the centre of Protestant Dissent. The discontent of Presbyterians and their growing influence in Belfast was a cause for concern for the government authorities. Indeed Presbyterians were a formidable force and found moral leadership among their ministers.[17]

4. Presbyterian ecclesiastical context

Much more will be said in the next chapter about the theological disputes among Presbyterians, but they provide some context for my argument here. Two subscription controversies were to shape Presbyterians, one of which is particularly relevant to the ecclesiastical context of Ulster in the eighteenth century. The controversy was about subscription to *The Westminster Confession*. The Synod, when it adopted the procedures of the Church of Scotland, adopted subscription as a standard for its ministers. But by the 1720s the New Light party viewed subscription as an infringement of private conscience. The dispute was to paralyse Presbyterianism for seven years until a non-subscribing Presbytery, the Presbytery of Antrim, was formed out of the Synod in 1726. I will consider this in detail in the next chapter. For the purposes of our considerations here it is important to note that schism had developed.[18]

However, that schism was not complete, for ministers from the non-subscribing Presbytery of Antrim continued to receive the *regium donum*[19] and to exchange pulpits with ministers of the General Synod of Ulster. They had no rights within the Synod, but were invited to send commissioners and there was co-operation on financial matters. The non-subscribers, or New Lights, had sympathizers remaining within the Synod so that by 1783 the requirement for subscription was dropped. *The Westminster Confession* remained as a subordinate standard of the church, subordinate to scripture, but the compromise enabled coexistence that kept divisive theological disputes at bay until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

When this issue again raised its head in the 1820s it became clear that the New Light position had depended on good will but had no structural security. It was the same goodwill that was to hold a politically divided church together at the time of the United Irish rebellion and for some years afterwards. The good will was binding because despite political differences, allegiance to God was not called into question. A measure of respect for differing political viewpoints was maintained through a sense of more fundamental common commitment to God. It might also be argued that in a context of unrest Presbyterians clung to one another in an attempt to protect church and society from falling into complete disarray. Their context, therefore, influenced their commitment to remain together and only in calmer political circumstances would their theological differences fully come to light. Having reached coexistence on the matter of subscription, the Ulster Presbyterians were also to manage coexistence, notwithstanding differing political allegiances. The binding good will is evidence that Presbyterians were not dominated by political differences but by God's sovereign claim on their loyalty, which resulted in the ethical dynamic toward unity rather than division. However, for some Ulster Presbyterians the United Irish

rebellion was an outrage, while for others it was truly a matter of life and death.

5. The United Irish Society

On October 18th, 1791 the United Irishmen met in Belfast to condemn English influence and to call for a 'cordial union among all the people of Ireland.' (See Appendix C, *Declaration and Resolutions of the Society of United Irishmen of Belfast*) Their formation cannot be understood apart from the history of the Volunteers in eighteenth Century Ireland. The Volunteers were formed to fill what they saw to be a vacuum in the defence of Ireland, a fear arising from the threat of invasion following the French Revolution. There were two existing possibilities for the defence of Ireland. One was in the Irish militia, who appeared to be failing in the task of defending Ireland, and the other from the landed gentry who, under the King's direction, could raise companies of yeomen and infantry. But such establishment-controlled troops were no comfort to the disenfranchised Presbyterians and Catholics of Ireland. Irish Volunteer companies were formed under local leadership and the first Irish Volunteer Company was formed in Belfast on St. Patrick's Day 1778. The Volunteers saw themselves as essential for the defence of Ireland and under the leadership of Henry Flood[20] and Bishop Hervey they took up the issue of parliamentary reform.

Soon Belfast's example spread across the country, numbers growing rapidly.[21] The first members of the Volunteers were drawn from the wealthier classes that could afford the uniform, weaponry and other essentials of army life.[22] They remained an illegal organisation though their existence brought about political gain. For the Irish this was seen in the lifting of restrictions on colonial trade; the Declaratory Acts, which had given the British parliament power over the colonies, were repealed, Westminster thereby renouncing the right to legislate for Ireland. At a local level

the Volunteers managed to control crime but landlords generally remained suspicious of them, not least because of their ability to provide an accessible ideology for political agitation.[23]

Volunteer companies had chaplains, some of them Presbyterian ministers, who addressed the Volunteer meetings in often sharp political sermons.[24] By the latter quarter of the eighteenth century, things had changed for both Presbyterians and Catholics. In 1780 the abolition of the Sacramental Test led to the restoration of Presbyterians to full citizenship, and the Relief Acts of 1778 and 1782 removed restrictions for Catholics on ownership of land and ecclesiastical organisation. But it was insufficient to satisfy desires for political legitimacy. Presbyterians began to push for an increase in the *regium donum* and the establishment of an institution for religious education. The desire for an increase in the *regium donum* was more than simply a matter of material gain. For the Synod it would be a symbol of official recognition. For the authorities this was a threat to their power and a sign of Presbyterian radicalism.

With these changes the Volunteers began to lose impact. This loss of impact might also be attributed to the inability of the Volunteers to take on board fully the concerns of their Catholic neighbours. While it is true that there was some softening of attitudes to Catholics, evidenced in the Volunteer Convention at Dungannon, 15 February 1782, when a resolution was passed rejoicing in the relaxation of the penal laws for Catholics,[25] and in the marching of the First Belfast Company of Volunteers to St. Mary's Chapel in Belfast, 30 May 1784, to present £84 raised for the chapel, their Colours still included Orange symbols and celebrated 'Protestant' history (Siege of Derry, Battles of Boyne, Aughrim and Culloden).[26] The ambivalence towards Catholics became more aggressively hostile as fears of an invasion from the Catholic powers in France and Spain increased. Many of the Volunteers felt full enfranchisement

for Catholics to be dangerous. The stab in the back was feared. By 1784, the Volunteers were in serious decline. Their legacy is acknowledged by McBride:

> Although the reformers ultimately failed to obtain their demands, the Ulster volunteers had created a provincial political culture outside the structures of the constitution.[27]

It was that provincial political culture that was to prove invaluable for the United Irishmen. With the fall of the Bastille in France a celebratory march was held in Belfast to the White Linen Hall. Three resolutions, drawn up by Wolfe Tone,[28] were proposed at that gathering. The first, condemning English influence in Irish affairs, and the second, seeking reform, were passed. The third, proposing a widening of the franchise and the abolition of religious distinctions, was rejected. The perception that there was a threat from Catholics was still very real. However, the French Revolution was also having its influence.

In France the extension of religious tolerance following the Revolution was widely recorded. The new Catholic State was proving itself capable and a weakening of Papal authority could be discerned. None of this escaped the radicals in Belfast who invited Tone to a meeting.[29] In Belfast, Tone met a group of Presbyterian businessmen who had formed themselves into a secret society. They met in Belfast on 14 October 1791 to form themselves into the United Irish Society. Others soon followed in Antrim, Down and Dublin.

As for Presbyterian ministers, they were divided on the notion of the United Irishmen. Some feared the excesses of radicalism while others saw it as the opportunity to achieve the ideals they espoused. Brooke notes that it was on matters of the relationship between church and state that differences clearly emerged:

> The differences among Presbyterians turned largely on those matters in which religion overlaps with politics – the relations that ought to exist between church and state.[30]

At the time of the United Irishmen, differences among Presbyterians reflect something of the complexity of the Calvinist understanding of the relationship between church and state. The complexity is shown up by Alister McGrath in his study of Calvin's life when he points to the two aspects of involvement in political and state life as being on the one hand an affirming of the state and on the other hand an attempt to bring it into line with a Calvinist understanding of what God intends for the world. So McGrath writes that,

> [i]f any religious movement of the sixteenth century was world-affirming, it was Calvinism. Yet Calvinism affirmed the world in order to master it, addressing its specific situations rather than luxuriating in its abstractions.[31]

The desire, amongst Calvinists, to link theory and practice by involvement in the political and economic sphere was nevertheless critiqued by Steel Dickson's assertion that religion and politics are not equals. The inevitable result was that some felt the need for greater involvement in political life than others did.

Across Ulster, political and agrarian unrest continued. By the mid-1790s the United Irishmen had become insurrectionist. Their ideology was radical and their organisation popular. Across the country different motives mingled to lend energy to the call for rebellion. From grievances about taxes and tithes to the call for Catholic Emancipation, involvement in the United Irishmen came for a variety of reasons and in June 1797 reached a climax with a membership of 121 000 men. But the authorities had already begun to move against them, undermining their aspirations and removing key figures from their ranks so that:

> [t]he Ulster rebellion was a fiasco: the Antrim army was crushed before the Down rising got off the ground, and the other counties were paralysed by indecision and fear.[32]

The question is, what inclined Presbyterian ministers to become involved in a bloody and doomed rebellion and what effect did this driving political allegiance have on their expression of loyalty to God? To consider those questions I turn to the lives of Rev. James Porter, Greyabbey, and Rev. Dr. William Steel Dickson.[33]

6. Rev. James Porter 1784 - 1798

Presbyterian ministers in eighteenth century Ireland, together with their Catholic counterparts, played a significant role in the reform movement. Together with men like Father James Coigly[34] and Myles Prendergast OSA,[35] their commitment was to political change. Some Presbyterian ministers, however, are notable because they were involved more deeply in the cause and activities of the United Irishmen and through their office as ministers they exercised influence and leadership.[36] While many interested in reform did not get involved in the '98 rebellion but viewed it as 'the sin of witchcraft',[37] others, like Rev. James Porter, were to pay dearly for their involvement. The cultural and political circumstances of the day called for loyalty to one cause or another, challenging allegiances and forcing choices from the people of the day. These allegiances were to be held within the bounds of fidelity to God. From the commitment of James Porter[38] to the United Irish cause it is clear that loyalty to God does not necessarily run counter to all other loyalties.

In 1786 the Presbytery of Bangor licensed Porter as a probationer and on 31 July 1787 he was ordained for the congregation of Greyabbey. Porter came to Greyabbey on the recommendation of Rev. Robert Black,[39] himself liberal

in theology.[40] On his ordination, Porter did not subscribe to *The Westminster Confession.*

At Greyabbey Porter worked among his congregation, farmed to supplement his income, and became a Volunteer, probably as a chaplain. With the passing of the Convention Act,[41] 1782, which suppressed the gathering together of people and therefore affected the Volunteers, Porter was more inclined to the United Irishmen. He began to make contributions to the United Irish paper, The *Northern Star,*[42] and it was this activity which was to gain him notoriety and bring him to the attention of the authorities.

Porter's contributions were in the form of songs, lampoons and satires, which provided commentary on the political and social context of the day, most notably *Billy Bluff and the Squire.* This piece of literature is revealing of Porter's stance and the United Irish feeling that it represented. The main characters in the series of seven letters written to the Northern Star between May and December 1786 are Squire Firebrand, probably representing Rev. John Cleland, loyalist rector of Newtownards, Billy Bluff, representing William Lowry who was the bailiff at Greyabbey, and Lord Mountmumble, representing Lord Londonderry, father of Lord Castlereagh.

Londonderry and Castlereagh belonged to the family of Stewart, of Mount Stewart. Robert Stewart, later Lord Londonderry, was the son of Alexander Stewart who owned Mount Stewart and Castlereagh was Alexander's grandson. During his early years at Greyabbey, Porter often visited Mount Stewart and enjoyed the company of the Stewart family, as did William Steel Dickson. The Stewarts were a reforming family, Alexander remaining a Presbyterian all his life. His son, Robert, however, became an Anglican enabling him to climb the ranks of the aristocracy. Despite this, Robert was looked on favourably by Presbyterians when he took his seat in Parliament. With the rise of the United Irishmen the Stewarts became fearful and, despite their

interest in reform, aligned themselves with the reactionary Irish government. This was looked on by those espousing the United Irish cause as a betrayal of enormous proportions.[43] Ultimately, Robert Stewart was to be the agent of Porter's arrest and hanging. Early in his *Billy Bluff* letters, Porter recognises, under the guise of the character R., the background character throughout the series who represented Porter himself, that he was, 'in danger of being hanged or put in jail, perhaps both.'[44]

Porter's views on the Stewart family and their switching of political allegiance are not tempered in his letters, as Billy Bluff reports R's words to the Squire:

> What a fine thing, says he, to see in one day, Mr changed into Lord; Mrs, into my Lady; Jack-a-Dandy into my Lord likewise; and all the little Misses turned into my Lady A. my Lady B. my Lady C. my Lady D. my Lady E. my Lady F. Did you ever see mushrooms growing on a dunghill, said he? Many at a time, said I. Then said he, you have seen what our new race of Lords and Earls resemble: they have rotton roots, flimsy stems, spungy heads, and start up when nobody expects it, in 24 hours.[45]

Porter typifies, tongue-in-cheek, the attitude of the gentry to the United Irish cause. This Squire is unable to contain himself with the news of the Stewart's new allegiance brought by Billy Bluff:

> D__n thinking, Billy, 'tis putting the world mad. O, what a happy country we had before men turned their thoughts to thinking: Catholics thought of nothing but just getting leave to live, and working for their meat: - Presbyterians thought of nothing but wrangling about religion and grumbling about tythes! – and Protestants thought of nothing but doing and saying what their betters bid them: and the Gentlemen thought of nothing but drinking, hunting, and the game laws. O! how times are changed, and all for the worse.[46]

From early in the series of letters the case is clearly being built against R. Billy Bluff reports him drinking and

swearing oaths with the parish priest.[47] His fate seemed already to be sealed for the oaths he swore were an affront to the establishment. The first oath which Billy Bluff reports is of priest and R. swearing together, *Prosperity to old Ireland.* The Squire finds it intolerable, telling Billy, 'he who would apply it to Ireland is a rebel, and ought to be hanged.'[48] He is no more impressed with the second oath, *Every man his own road to Heaven*, for he considers that, 'a toast no man would drink but a Republican and a Sinner.'[49] The final oath which Billy Bluff reports, *Liberty to those who dare contend for it*, brings a response from the Squire that echoes the charges that would later be brought against Porter whom he saw an, '[i]mpudent scoundrel; the signal of rebellion, anarchy and confusion.'[50]

While Porter's Billy Bluff series of letters clearly represent United Irish views, it is unclear if Porter himself ever took the United Irish oath. Whether he did or not, he certainly had the trust of the United Irish leadership. Carroll emphasises the impact of his writings as crucial, no matter about his membership of the United Irishmen:

> Whether or not he was formally a United Irishman is irrelevant. Porter's chief significance lies elsewhere – the damage he inflicted in print and pulpit on the credibility of landlords, magistrates and parsons.[51]

Porter also made his impact and declared his hand as a preacher. He made his views particularly clear in a later published sermon entitled *Wind & Weather*, preached on 16 February 1797, a government declared Fast Day. Fast Days were in the gift of the government and by the 1790s they had taken on political, rather than religious, overtones. This subversion of theological and liturgical practice for partisan political ends was intolerable for Dissenters and remains a concern for the Church in Northern Ireland into the twentieth century. Some would argue that Orange Services, for example, sometimes have the same questionable linkage

to political successes of the past. However, in Ireland at the time, because of the political overtones, Fast Days had a mixed reception, particularly among Dissenters.[52] The very use of a Fast Day by Porter was, in itself, a sign of the influence of the context in which he found himself. Context is revealed to play a part in the life of the Church, for Porter was not alone in using Fast Days to make his political point. It may be said that Porter was erring into the political realm too far, taking the opportunities presented to him. On the other hand, it may be argued that he was simply doing what any Calvinist would do – immersing himself in the world to bring his understanding of equity amongst all people to the fore.

In the Greyabbey pulpit Porter expressed his outrage at repression in Ireland and at church-state collaboration on a Fast Day declared for 16 February 1797.[53] The implication of Porter's sermon was that the fast was not about thanksgiving at all but to benefit the government's own position[54]:

> Before I proceed to state the various reasons which we have this day for joy and thankfulness, it may be necessary to observe, that those days appointed by the wisdom and goodness of government called *fast* days, are not to be understood in the literal sense of that word, they might with more properly be called *feast* days. ...they are wisely contrived to change their nature as circumstances require; and those who have the power of appointing the *time* of worshipping God, have the goodness to appoint the *manner* also.[55]

As ever Porter expressed his anger at repression, arguing that United Irish interest in the American Revolution was, 'in consequence of our connexion with England – Some people call this connexion, subjection'. Porter's understanding of the function of the state to protect its citizens and their freedom to worship was put at risk by the impositions of government and in the face of them Porter could not keep silent. He called again for reform, but

warned that attempts at reform in the past had been insufficient.[56] Porter was aware of the increasing desire for conflict to bring about reform and warned that it might come.[57]

Porter also, however, warned all gathered, 'But let us not, in our extacy, forget that extremes are to be avoided.'[58] Although Porter was known to have disapproved of the form that the rebellion took, he was accused of being part of a group of insurgents who captured an army messenger travelling from Portaferry to Comber and of reading the message to the insurgents. He was arrested on 30 June 1798 and accused of treason, rebellion and sedition. Prosecuted by Billy Bluff's Squire (Mount Stewart), Porter was found guilty and hanged, 2 July 1798. That same summer two other Presbyterian ministers were hanged – Robert Gowdy of Dunover and Alexander Warwick, a probationer in Kirkcubbin.

Porter's story may well persuade us that the pen is mightier than the sword. His story is illustration of the wing of United Irishmen who, through speech and pen, stirred the hearts and minds of ordinary people to become involved in the movement, many in the abortive rebellion of 1798. This Porter did while continuing to minister to the congregation at Greyabbey. His commitment to democracy, embedded in his own Presbyterian tradition with its system of government which was believed to be in line with the teaching of scripture, drove his political commitment and ultimately the ethical stand he took against the government. As Porter's writings reveal, it was contemptible that Protestants should take their fate, even after the abolition of the Sacramental Test, quietly.

Like his Presbyterian colleagues he viewed government as God-given, but as Christ is the sole King and head of the Church, government might sometimes find itself in dispute with the Church. For Porter and his United Irish colleagues that dispute arose because of the infringement of

the rights and privileges of Presbyterians, specifically under the Penal Laws but continuing even after their repeal. He took a broad view, preferring the United Irish cause to that of the failing Volunteers who could not fully support Catholic emancipation. It may be said, therefore, that Porter's involvement in the United Irishmen arose because of his Calvinist theology, his understanding of church-state relationships and his cultural situatedness. For Porter loyalty to God was an adjudicating principle and drove his commitment to the United Irish cause, despite his disapproval of the excesses of the Rebellion. His theological understanding of government as given by God for the good of all people was affronted by the discrimination in the Ireland of his day. He was culturally aware, theologically critical and overtly decisive that his allegiance to God called for a righteousness evidenced in his political action. Porter died an Irish Presbyterian, a member of a politically divided denomination, yet united in its belonging and allegiance to God.

It is perhaps of some surprise to note that a church which incorporates a history of division, did not divide on the matter of United Irish politics even though the rift between those for and against the cause ran deep. They remained together precisely because there was a clearly understood separation between allegiance to God and political loyalties. Not all of Porter's United Irish colleagues suffered death, but they suffered in other ways. We turn now to Porter's colleague and friend, Rev. Dr. William Steel Dickson.

7. Rev. Dr. William Steel Dickson 1744 - 1824

William Steel Dickson[59] was a man of some reputation known for the lucidity of his arguments for parliamentary reform and also for the maturity of his theology. Of the New Light party, Carroll ranks him among the generous:

> His arguments for parliamentary reform and religious toleration are among the finest examples of Presbyterian generosity, while his political theology ranks high in Enlightenment thought.[60]

Returning from his studies Dickson was licensed as a probationer in 1767 and ordained to the congregation of Ballyhalbert on 6 March 1771[61] by the Presbytery of Killyleagh. The Presbytery was a non-subscribing Presbytery and so it is unlikely that he ever signed *The Westminster Confession.*[62] He carried on his ministry and at the same time farmed to supplement his income. Dickson's involvement in national politics began in the 1770s, years that were a 'watershed in Ulster Presbyterianism'.[63]

It was at the time of the American war of independence, 1775, that Dickson made his mark as an outspoken preacher. During those years Dickson spoke out vehemently against the government's involvement in America. Two sermons in particular are of note, both preached on government declared Fast Days. The first was preached in December 1776 on the subject of national repentance. Dickson took the opportunity to mingle religion and politics, as did the government of the day. His sermon illustrates the connection he saw between the faith he espoused and the political context in which he lived, using the theme of repentance, so important in the context of fasting, to point to the political challenges of his day. Dickson cleverly turned the thoughts of his listeners from the political situation in America to their own political situation in which some found themselves marginalized and excluded. For Dickson this appears to have been a matter of moral leadership.

> ... as national Wickedness is the probable Cause of our divided Opinions, and distracted Counsels, and of that Confusion, War, and Blood-shed which rage thro' our King's Dominions, we, as we tender the

> Restoration of Peace abroad, and unanimity at Home – As we regard the Lives, Liberties, and Happiness of ourselves, and Brethren, *should humble ourselves, and pray unto God, and seek his Face, and turn from our wicked Ways.*[64]

In the second sermon, preached on February 1778, Dickson criticised the government for the ruinous effects of civil war. As a result, Dickson found himself denounced among many loyalists as a traitor.

Dickson's ability in public oratory was again seen in March 1779 when he preached a sermon, as their chaplain, to the Echlinville Volunteers. Dickson called for parliamentary reform, claiming privileges for those who found themselves marginalised by the political arrangements of the day. His rousing words made his opinions on the connection between faith and life clear:

> As Men, we have Rights and Privileges, Wives and Children; As Members of Society we have a Country and Brethren; and, as Christians, a God, who is great and terrible, whom we ought to remember, and a Religion, which we owe to his Goodness, by which we hope to be saved.[65]

Dickson also made a plea for the admission of Catholics to the Volunteers, a plea that he would often make.[66]

In 1780 Dickson moved from the congregation of Ballyhalbert to the congregation of Portaferry where he opened an academy for boys, and in June of the same year he was elected Moderator of the General Synod of Ulster. In a sermon preached to the Synod he made it clear that he was committed to further reform. Dickson took the opportunity, in his privileged position as Moderator of the General Synod of Ulster, to appeal for political change, again emphasising the interconnection between faith and ethical living. The sermon preached to the Synod was published in Dickson's *Scripture Politics*. The booklet included a sermon preached on Christmas Day 1792, tracing the history of religious bigotry

from Constantine and enmeshing church and state. Dickson applies this to England and Ireland and held up the French Revolution as providing access to freedom. Dickson did not, however, call for revolution but for radical reform. He urged Catholics and Presbyterians not to allow themselves to be divided from one another as they had been in the past. The third sermon was preached at Portaferry, 13 January 1793. In this Dickson affirmed the right of Christian ministers to speak on politics and he drew a distinction between the established and Dissenting tradition. Dickson made it clear that he still thought there was time for reform but warned that if it did not come there would be rebellion. In Dickson's case, faith called him to speak out on the matter of the exclusion some of his countrymen and women experienced because of the social, political and economic context of his day. It was, in Dickson's view, a matter for the Church:

> We have lately seen toleration extend her soothing arms, and offer an embrace unknown before. Let us rejoice in the prospect which this opens before us and let us join our helping hand to extend them wider still.[67]

The Test Act, 1704, had permitted Presbyterians to stand for parliament, but this was deemed far from adequate. At the Synod meeting a declaration was passed, Dickson's influence most certainly having been exercised,

> ... calling for a reform in the representation of the House of Commons, and congratulated 'their Roman Catholic countrymen in their being restored to the privileges of the Constitution', and expressed the 'prayer that the time may never more return when religious distinctions shall be used as a pretext for disturbing society, or among man against his neighbour, and that intolerance of every kind may be trodden under foot.[68]

For Dickson, religious differences should never become an excuse for political discrimination. As a matter of

ethical living, Dickson was able to separate his theological convictions and even differences with his Roman Catholic neighbours, from his theological commitments to equality, liberty and fraternity.

Unlike James Porter, William Steel Dickson's relationship to the United Irishmen is clear. He took the United Irish Test in 1791[69] believing that society's aims to be consonant with his own political and theological convictions: the equal representation of all in Parliament; unity among the Irish people; and removal of disqualification based on religion. Dickson kept up an active involvement both with the United Irishmen and with the Volunteers. In 1793 he was delegated by the Barony of Ards to the Volunteer Convention at Dungannon where he spoke in favour of full Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform.[70] This was truly a fearless prophetic voice for it was more than a quarter of a century later, in 1829, before full Catholic Emancipation was realised.

Dickson's gift in radical oratory did not go unnoticed. Government was already alarmed by the Catholic Convention, which met at Tailors' Hall December 1792 and the Volunteer Convention only served to alarm them further.[71] They responded with a series of measures to control such gatherings, followed soon after by the Convention Act which effectively put an end to the Volunteers.

After 1793 the old Ascendancy strategy of dividing by rumour was used to stir up sectarian unrest. Dickson was at pains to expose what was going on but he was accused of sedition. Other United Irishmen were being arrested and the authorities were trying to gather evidence against Dickson. In October 1796, six members of his congregation were arrested and one was moved to Kilmainham jail in Dublin. Dickson went to visit him there, a visit which branded him, in the eyes of the authorities, as violent and dangerous.

Despite attacks on them and arrests made, the United Irish spirit remained strong, as did Dickson's spirit. In March and April 1798 he visited Scotland on family business.[72] On his return his luggage was taken. It was the beginning of a period of harassment that culminated in Dickson's arrest on 5 June 1798 at Ballynahinch where evidence against him was insufficient to incriminate him as a rebel leader in Co. Down. He was, however, transported to a prison ship in Belfast Lough and ultimately to prison in Scotland.

Government was not alone in their dismay and discontent at United Irish activity. In 1798 the Synod began an investigation into the seditious and treasonable practices implied against some of its members.[73] In 1799 the Synod passed a resolution against those who had been found to be involved in seditious and treasonable activity and censured them. While Dickson operated with the same theological understanding and cultural concerns as Porter, his actions were to be censured as his political allegiance and his loyalty to God began to clash and emerge in an ethical lifestyle which the Synod could neither make sense of nor tolerate, and hence it was recorded that,

> (t)he several presbyteries having made their reports, according to the injunction of last meeting, this Synod has the satisfaction of finding, that the general conduct of its members and probationers has been conformable to order and good government, in the late afflicting circumstance of the country. It appears, that of the comparatively small numbers who have been implicated in treasonable or seditious practices, two only, one a Minister, the other a Probationer, have been executed; two are still in confinement – some have expressed their sincere contrition – others are no longer connected with the Synod – and the remainder have either voluntarily, or by permission of Government, removed from the Kingdom.[74]

So the political differences began to make their mark on the internal relationships of the Synod. It was clear that

political allegiance could come under the scrutiny of the wider church when it led those who held a wider and more ethical stance on justice and inclusiveness to be at odds with the dominant discourse in the State and within Irish Presbyterianism. The Synod decided to censure Dickson, thereby bringing political difference rather than theological consonance to the fore, but for Dickson this was not the end of the matter. He argued that as government could not gather enough evidence to convict him but only to confine him, neither should the Synod. He expressed contrition and the Synod made up its mind and acknowledged that, '(in) such absence of proof the Synod erred in finding against him.'[75]

Following his time in a Scottish prison, Dickson returned to Ireland in 1802. He returned to face illness, impoverishment and bereavement. His son was dead, his wife had been invalided and his family was in debt. Added to all of that he had little prospect of returning to ministry. Dickson's chosen ethical lifestyle, driven by his theological and biblical convictions, had brought him into conflict with both church and state and had cost him dearly. However, in 1803 Dickson was called to the secessionist congregation of Keady, Co. Armagh. Dickson did not subscribe at his installation and found himself a member of the non-subscribing Presbytery of Tyrone.

During his years in Keady Dickson tried to overturn the Synod's ruling regarding his 'treacherous and seditious activity'. Despite the censure, he availed himself of the democratic opportunities open to him within the Synod. He brought a memorial to the 1805 Synod, but it was dismissed. In 1806 he was unable to attend the Synod meeting owing to illness. He was present in 1807, 1809 and 1810 but did not raise the matter. In 1810 he found himself in dispute with the Synod on another matter. Dickson's *Narrative Of Confinement and Exile* (hereafter *Narrative*) was almost ready for publication and he needed access to Synodical records.

The Clerk, Rev. Thomas Cuming, refused him and Dickson memorialised the 1811 Synod to have Cuming's decision overturned. The Synod, while upholding Cuming's reasons for refusing Dickson access to the records, granted his request. Perhaps this was an expression of their willingness to be reunited with him in common commitment to Christ.

During all of this period Dickson remained active in political life.[76] In May 1812 Dickson's *Narrative* was finally published. It caused a storm at the Synod in June where Dickson found himself in confrontation with Rev. Dr. Robert Black who challenged Dickson to say that he had not been involved in fomenting the '98 rebellion. Dickson refused, arguing that his denial would not be believed anyway. The Synod invited Dickson to retract some of what he had said in the *Narrative*, but he refused. Initially the Synod was hoping to suspend Dickson until he made the necessary retractions but they eventually decided to give him one year to reflect on his position. During that year Dickson prepared a pamphlet, *Retractions,* which was adequate enough for the Synod to reconsider the issue in 1813 at which time the Synod permitted the matter to drop. Permitting the matter to drop was not out of unwillingness to deal with it, but rather, in the Presbyterian context, a way of saying that the matter was no longer worthy of dispute or debate. In this way the Synod permitted Dickson himself to leave the matter behind.

In 1812 Rev. Henry Montgomery and Rev. William Porter took up Dickson's cause, challenging the wording agreed by the 1799 Synod. Finally the Synod agreed that the words, 'implicated in treasonable or seditious practices', were inaccurate:

> On referring to the Synod's minutes of 1799, it was unanimously resolved, that by the phrase, 'implicated in treasonable or seditious practices', the Synod did not mean to express any thing more, than that Dr. Dickson and Mr Smith, two of the persons therein

> alluded to, had been confined by Government, under suspicion of treason and sedition, and that this Synod now attaches no other meaning to that expression; and if that expression has been otherwise understood or applied, the meaning of the Synod has been misconceived.[77]

Despite Dickson's denial and the inability of government to prove the charges against him, the evidence suggests that he did play an active part in the United Irish rebellion.[78] The difficulties of Dickson's relationship with the Synod only serve to illuminate the difficulties of negotiating loyalty to God in a context where other loyalties are sought and sometimes demanded. Indeed, the difficulties facing individuals in disentangling the two are also illuminated by Dickson's story, as is the process of sanctification.

In 1815 Dickson retired to Belfast where he was helped financially by old United Irish families. He died in Belfast, 27 December 1824 and was buried in a pauper's grave in Clifton Street cemetery. Despite his inauspicious end Dickson had an enormous impact on the United Irish cause. His character and gifts are summed up by Clifford:

> He had a powerful mind, an enduring character, stubbornly held principles, and an elegant forthright pen.[79]

It remains for us a matter of concern that Dickson's commitment to the cause, a commitment that took him to prison, may have been in conflict with his loyalty to God; likewise for James Porter, who died for his dedication to the United Irish cause. To those matters we now turn, remembering that both Dickson and Porter lived and worked inside a politically divided church, a church whose members were sometimes in sympathy with them and sometimes opposed to them.

8. Overarching loyalty to God?

For Porter and Dickson, the cost of their commitment to a political cause cannot be underestimated. Political allegiance cost Porter his life and cost Dickson years of imprisonment and a degree of exile from Presbyterianism. The stability of family life that Dickson had known changed dramatically on his return from prison. So too did his position in the Synod, costing him years of argument and dispute as he struggled to be accepted back into the community he loved.

Such dramatic costs for political allegiance appear, on the face of it, to be the transcending loyalty of these men's lives. Surely there is no greater loyalty for a person than the one for which a person will lay down their lives? The Christian community, committed to God above all other allegiances, might well argue that it is only for God that one should lay down one's life. The stories of Porter and Dickson reveal the complexity of the question of identity, and therefore of loyalty, together with the complexity of disentangling God from god. As I argued in Part I, Section 1.1, the Christian community is influenced by contextual circumstances and it is within those contextual circumstances that the meaning and implications of God's sovereignty over our lives must be negotiated and renegotiated as circumstances become more complex and ambiguous. In Dickson's case in particular the view taken by the Synod that he was involved in seditious activity should surely have alerted him to concern for protecting his primary allegiance to God. Perhaps that is why he went to such great lengths to have the Synod amend its decision of 1799, attempting to show that his allegiance to God had not been undermined by his political involvement.

For Dickson and Porter there was no conflict between their commitment to the United Irish cause and their commitment to God. If anything their political allegiance arose from their theological convictions

concerning the transcendence of God, their reading and interpretation of scripture which supported their view of church-state relationships, and their understanding of the ethical lifestyle that God invites of those who follow Christ. For Porter and Dickson, commitment was a matter both of love for their neighbours and of Christian discipleship. Dickson eloquently expressed this in his sermon to the Synod, June 1781:

> ... the descriptions of love enjoined in the gospel, and the effects which it ought to produce, are perfectly conformable. It restrains from injury, disdains the narrow limits of religious and political associations, and rises superior to enmity and insult. ... The love which it enjoins must press forward into action; set opposition and dangers at defiance; and if the public good requires, bravely encounter death itself.[80]

The ethical outworking of allegiance to God and love of their neighbours, in this case their disenfranchised Catholic neighbours, led to Porter and Dickson's involvement in the United Irish cause as a matter of political belief but also as a matter of Christian discipleship. It was that sense of discipleship which kept Porter in communion with the Synod and which drove Dickson to seek the repeal of the censure Synod made against him. Their concern, of course, was not to be lone voices in the wilderness but to inspire others to the same, as they saw it, prophetic witness as an ethical response of the church to the circumstances of the society in which it found itself. However, the immense challenge of applying loyalty to God above all other gods as an adjudicating principle, especially in situations of political opposition and social unrest, is revealed by Dickson's unerring and uncompromising commitment. It is the case that the adjudicating principle has the capacity to be subverted by strong cultural and political influences, particularly where the Christian community is uncritical of those influences. It was only in his *Retractions* that Dickson

began to disentangle the principle from the influences, cultural and political, on his life. Moreover, this showed conscience and discernment at work as Dickson and Porter questioned the political circumstances of their day and their ethical engagement with those circumstances.

Dickson and Porter were committed to the United Irish cause because they were committed to its ideals and not because it became rebellious. As I argued in Part I, Section 3.3, belonging to God means living with a commitment to the peace and justice that God wants for the world. Porter and Dickson were concerned for their Catholic neighbours, and indeed for themselves and their 'brethren', that they should all know the freedoms and privileges which they believed God ordained for all in society. For them, to do otherwise would have been to shore up injustice, which they believed was not God's desire for the world. Their loyalty to God required them to live as they did and to challenge government in the places where it did not uphold God's law of equality and freedom. If the government of the day had speedily moved to reform, Dickson and Porter would have had no need to be involved with the United Irishmen.

Their overt political lives were lived inside a church that was experiencing its own internal difficulties. In 1743 the Presbytery of Armagh divided and the new non-subscribing Presbytery of Dromore was formed. Both remained members of the Synod. In 1774 the Presbytery of Bangor divided on the issue of subscription also. Bangor remained a non-subscribing Presbytery and the new subscribing Presbytery of Belfast was formed. Again, both remained members of the Synod. The greatest ecclesiastical fracture was with the Presbytery of Antrim in 1726, a Presbytery which operated outside the Synod and yet had close links to it through the sharing of pulpits, non-voting debate at Synod meetings and shared financial arrangements.

What should be underlined is that theological and ecclesiological difficulties were surmounted by generosity and compromise, ensuring that the church, in the eighteenth century at least, was not radically split by theological dispute. It has been argued that the church at this time was behaving as a national church, endeavouring to hold together people of diverse opinions and providing a place where they could all belong. Both Brooke and Tesch clearly make this argument, emphasising the distinction between the church and political society.

> The Synod of Ulster, the main Presbyterian body in Ireland, assumed the status of a quasi-national church, representing a regional society that was self-sufficient and distinct from the political society governed by Dublin and London.[81]

While both Dickson and Porter were of the non-subscribing, New Light, party, not all Presbyterian ministers involved in the United Irish cause were. (See Appendix D, *Presbyterian ministers and probationers suspected of involvement in the 1798 Rebellion*) In fact, from the information available it is much more likely that those involved were drawn equally from the Old and New Lights. Despite theological tensions they acted alongside one another in a cause they believed to be both Godly and right and they acted together in a common loyalty to God.

Within the Synod there were many deeply opposed to the United Irish rebellion. Among them were those who had never espoused the ideals even of the Volunteers and those who, having supported the Volunteers, found the violent excesses of the United Irishmen unacceptable. Yet they remained inside one church, a church of mutual listening and generous compromise, a church that was able to accept Dickson back into its ranks long after the United Irish rebellion. Clearly this cannot have been easy for the Synod, and Dickson's sometimes abrasive manner did not

help. But the Synod was, nevertheless, of one church, committed to one God and, while experiencing some theological differences, had much in common.

Can this willingness of the Presbyterian community to stay together be construed as overarching loyalty to God? I believe so, not least because Dickson was accepted back into the Synod. That the Synod was prepared to be conciliatory indicates that across the political divide there was a common commitment to the church that Presbyterians so ardently believed, and still believe today, to be governed by principles based in scripture and under the authority of Jesus Christ. It could, however, be quite another matter when church and state align themselves in a pact with both political and theological elements, such as the Ulster Covenant of 1912. While this is a matter worthy of consideration, what is to be emphasised here is that Presbyterians in Ulster in the last quarter of the eighteenth century were politically active and politically divided, reflecting the divisions of their day rather than wholly taking up one position or another. But they were also a community that exercised tolerance, practiced forbearance and remained committed to the community of Christ's church despite other differences.

Those who joined the ranks of the United Irishmen did so as a matter of making the connection between what the Christian community understands about God and a Christian ethic. Likewise, those on the other side of the political divide. That those who, like Dickson, espoused the United Irish cause wished to remain members of the Synod, and that the Synod provided them a place of belonging, is a contextual example of the living reality and complexity of exercising loyalty to God above all other loyalties. How this loyalty is explicated from scripture, as the community of believers seeks to exercise their faith in ethical living, is considered in the next chapter.

[1] Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings of William Steel Dickson* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1991) p71.
[2] Presbyterians in Ireland at this time are identified by three strands – those belonging to the Synod of Ulster; 'Seceders'; and those belonging to the Southern Association. My focus is largely on those belonging to the General Synod of Ulster, and the group related to them, the Presbytery of Antrim. The General Synod of Ulster was formed in 1690 and by the end of the seventeenth century had adopted the rules and procedures of the Church of Scotland in Ireland.
[3] Close links already existed between America and Presbyterians as many had emigrated there.
[4] Their sympathy was not without due effect in Ulster. 'Presbyterian sympathy for the colonial cause alarmed the defenders of Church and State, re-opening old divisions between Anglicans and Dissenters.' Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) p 118.
[5] 'By the close of the American War, Ulster Presbyterians had emerged as a powerful interest in Irish politics for the first time in over half a century, courted both by the patriot leadership at College Green and the administration.' Ibid. p144.
[6] Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) p117.
[7] 'Through the minister, local society was linked to the world beyond the parish and through him new ideas filtered through.' Pieter Tesch, 'Presbyterian Radicalism' in D. Dickson, D. Keogh & K Whelan eds., *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism And Rebellion* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1993) pp33-48.
[8] 'Most important of all, their very religion, with its democratic church structure, anti-authoritarianism and doctrine of a direct covenant between God and man, put them out of step with contemporary patterns of authority and deference.' Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) p116f.
[9] Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the late Eighteenth Century*, p109.
[10] Ibid. p15.
[11] 'Anti-popery was a remarkably elastic ideology, capable of taking disruptive as well as cohesive forms, depending on the political and economic context. It was a favourite trick of Anglican polemicists to portray the Presbyterian as a species of papist …' Ibid. p16.
[12] 'In much of the country mass was said in thatched cabins, in private houses, in sheds, or in the open air, although Dublin boasted more impressive buildings.' Ibid. p22.
[13] 'While restrictions on economic activity and religious worship could sometimes be evaded the exclusion of Catholics from the public world of Irish politics was complete.' Ibid. p23.
[14] 'The Catholic populace, though comprising two-thirds of the population, was excluded from political rights and theoretically from landownership. The Dissenters too were excluded from corporations until 1780, and though not legally debarred from Parliament, only a handful of Dissenting MPs was ever returned.' Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*, p9.
[15] In 1780 those clauses in the Test Act applying to Presbyterians were abolished, and in 1782 Presbyterian marriages were recognised.
[16] 'No conscientious Presbyterian could qualify in this way; and all such found themselves in effect ejected from the office they held, and precluded from any similar employment in the future.' A. C. Anderson, *The Story Of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1965) p59.
[17] 'The wealth of the middling Presbyterians, combined with the intellectual leadership supplied by their ministers, made them a

formidable force.' Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the late Eighteenth Century*, p37.

[18] 'That the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has always been vulnerable to schism is well known. The involvement of the laity in the government of the Church, and the elevation of scripture above human authority, has ensured that the General Synod (now the General Assembly) has been harassed by a fringe of splinter groups ranging from the Seceders and Covenanters of the eighteenth century to today's Free Presbyterians.' Ibid. p141.

[19] The *regium donum*, or King's bounty, was introduced as financial support for Dissenting ministers during the reign of Charles II. It was to be a mark of greater toleration of Presbyterians. However, Holmes notes the effects it would have: 'Payment of *regium donum* to the Irish Presbyterian ministers was at first irregular, as one might expect in such a grant from a King like Charles II, but it marked the beginning of an anomalous relationship between Irish Presbyterians and the state, resented by the Church of Ireland, and often a cause of division among Presbyterians themselves and in their relationships with their co-religionists in Britain.' Finlay Holmes, *Our Irish Presbyterian Heritage* (Belfast: W & G Baird, 1985) p44.

[20] Henry Flood was born in 1732 and entered the Irish Parliament in 1759. At this time the Irish Protestants were impatient with the British Parliament's right to legislate for Ireland over the wishes of the Irish Parliament, under the terms of Poynings' Law. Also, the British government controlled a majority in Ireland's House of Commons through the distribution of crown patronage by the owners of parliamentary boroughs. His outstanding oratorical powers soon enabled him to create an effective opposition inside the Irish Parliament that agitated for political reforms. They demanded that Irish parliamentary elections should take place every eight years instead of merely at the start of a new British monarch's reign. In 1768 Flood's patriots agitated sufficiently to persuade the Duke of Grafton's government to pass the Octennial Act; in 1769 and 1771 they defeated measures to grant funds for the British administration in Ireland. Their long-range goal was legislative independence. Bishop Hervey was one of his supporters.

[21] In April 1779 there were 15 000 members, in September 30 000, and in December 40 000

[22] It is also true that the Volunteers had members of the Anglican Communion among their ranks but, 'In the North most Volunteers were Presbyterian, and they frequently elected the more well-to-do members of the community as officers in preference to the Episcopalian gentry.' A. T. Q. Stewart, *A Deeper Silence: The Hidden Origins of the United Irishmen* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993) p51.

[23] 'Volunteering offered an opportunity for the middling ranks to affirm their civic identity, particularly important for Dissenters who were barred from public office until the repeal of the Test Act in 1780.' Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the late Eighteenth Century*, p123.

[24] 'Even the Presbyterian ministers were so fully inspired with the patriotism of the day, that, in several places, the rusty black was exchanged for the glowing scarlet, and the title of 'Reverend' for that of 'Captain'.' Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings Of William Steel Dickson*, p16.

[25] Although their arguments may have had more to do with their beliefs in private judgement than in genuine support for Catholic emancipation.

[26] ' ... that movement was aggressively Protestant and however advanced it might be on the political front, it shared the Ascendancy's anti-popery.' Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish*

Independence, p113. Some Volunteer Corps were open to Catholics, but mostly in towns where there was Catholic mercantile community.
[27] Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the late Eighteenth Century*, p160.
[28] Wolfe Tone is the recognised founder of Irish republican nationalism.
[29] 'Among those of the so-called 'secret committee' of Volunteers responsible for inviting him to Belfast, Tone likewise found a general willingness to co-operate with and learn more about the Catholics.' Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*, p137.
[30] Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism: The Historical Perspective 1610-1770* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987) p112. 'Presbyterian radicalism, construed in the broadest sense as support for parliamentary reform, continued to be split over the question of Catholic representation, the position of the monarchy, the suffrage, the justice of the French war, and the methods by which reform might be pursued.' Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the late Eighteenth Century*, p177.
[31] Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 1993) p219.
[32] Ibid. p202.
[33] 'Because of the way history has been written, mention of the United Irishmen evokes the name of Wolfe Tone before any other, and then perhaps the name of William Drennan. It would accord better with the actual course of events if the two best known names of the United Irish movement were the Rev William Steel Dickson and the Rev James Porter, Presbyterian ministers at Portaferry and Greyabbey respectively.' Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings of William Steel Dickson*, p5.
[34] Father James Coigly was born at Kilmore, Co. Armagh to a farming family. He was ordained at Dungannon in 1785 by the Bishop of Armagh. From there he went to study at Lombard College in Paris where he found himself in dispute with the College authorities. Despite leaving the College he remained in Paris until after the fall of the Bastille, 14 July 1789. From France he returned to Dundalk where he is known to have brought James Napper Tandy, leader of the United Irishmen in Dublin, to speak to the Catholic Defenders. The Defenders were involved in agrarian unrest where landlords and magistrates worked together to exclude Catholics. It was in the connection that he forged between the Defenders and the United Irishmen that Denis Carroll believes Coigly made his most significant contribution. 'Coigly's main contribution may well have been to cement an alliance between the United Irishmen and the Defenders. He seems to have had major influence in persuading radicalised Catholics towards, 'a cordial union of affection' among Irish people of whatever persuasion.' Denis Carroll, *Unusual Suspects: Twelve Radical Clergy* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1998) p28. Coigly's activities brought him to the attention of government authorities and in 1797 he moved to Manchester and then to London because he was warned of personal danger in Dundalk. From England Coigly is known to have travelled to Hamburg with Rev. Arthur McMahon, Presbyterian minister in Holywood, and also to France on United Irish business. In March 1798 Coigly was arrested at Margate and eventually tried for treason in May of that year and he was hanged.
[35] Myles Prendergast, an Augustinian priest, remains a mystery before his joining of the French army when it landed at Killala under the captaincy of Father Henry O'Kane, aide-de-camp of General Jean Joseph Amable Humbert. Prendergast's radical tendencies meant he was much sought by the authorities and he was imprisoned and charged with treason but escaped, killing a prison guard in the process. Prendergast spent his life thereafter on the run, evading capture for decades thanks to the inhabitants of Connemara and Mayo.

The church penalised him for killing the guard while escaping from Castlebar prison but his order kept in touch with him and records exist of monies sent to him. 'Despite his status as an outlaw and, for many years, a 'hunted priest', the Augustinian order kept contact with Myles Prendergast through several decades.' Ibid. p68. Prendergast died in Connemara in 1842 while still on the run.

[36] To understand how these Presbyterian ministers came to exercise political influence and leadership it is necessary to understand their role as congregational ministers. In eighteenth century Ireland, Presbyterian ministers were closely identified with their congregation, not least because then, as now, the members of the congregation chose the minister. Congregations could not offer full financial support to their ministers so in order to supplement their income ministers worked the land, got involved in education or found some other way to generate income. This extra work compounded their sense of identification with members of the congregation who shared some of the same occupations. Such close identification with their congregations meant that Presbyterian ministers were more likely to express the grievances of their members. Indeed, Denis Carroll notes the formidable force that Presbyterian ministers were in the eighteenth century, 'It has been argued that, independent of the views of individual ministers, the eighteenth–century Presbyterian ministry was itself a subversive institution. Since it was not an 'established' institution it could retain detachment from the 'stake in the country' mentality.' Ibid. p21.

[37] A. T. Q. Stewart, *Summer Soldiers* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1995) p179.

[38] James Porter was born in Ballindrait, Co. Donegal to a family with a farming and milling tradition. When he was of age James ceded the family farm to his younger brother and left to teach at Dromore, Co. Down. There he married and left with his wife for Drogheda in 1780. From there Porter travelled to Glasgow as a student for the Presbyterian ministry, 1784-1786. Glasgow was reputed to be a liberal, New Light, university and Porter became known for his liberal ideas.

[39] Like Porter, Black was interested in reform. Unlike Porter, he feared excesses from the United Irishmen and withdrew his support. Black, Porter and Steel Dickson were all frequent visitors at Mount Stewart.

[40] Porter's predecessor at Greyabbey had been Rev. Samuel Martin Stephenson, called in 1774. Stephenson had scruples about subscription to *The Westminster Confession* such that the Presbytery of Bangor voted by a majority of one to permit him to make his own declaration of faith. Those who had demanded subscription withdrew and formed the Presbytery of Belfast.

[41] The Convention Act, 1782, was chiefly aimed at gatherings of Catholics which made the government nervous but it also had effect on Volunteer gatherings.

[42] The *Northern Star* was the United Irish paper, begun in 1792 in Belfast. It was published twice weekly and edited by Samuel Neilson, the son of a Presbyterian elder. The *Northern Star* played an important role in spreading information and news about the United Irish cause.

[43] 'Between 1795 and 1798 Mount Stewart, as an agent of the most reactionary Irish Government ever, set about destroying the social movement of which it had been the accepted leader between 1790 and 1793.' Brendan Clifford ed., *Billy Bluff And The Squire (A Satire On Irish Aristocracy) And Other Writings By Rev. James Porter* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1991) p13.

[44] Ibid. p16.

[45] Ibid. p27.

[46] Ibid. p19.

[47] 'Him and the Popish Priest drank together last market day till all was blue again with them; they shaked hands, so they did, drank toasts, and sung songs.' Ibid. p16.
[48] Ibid. p16.
[49] Ibid. p16.
[50] Ibid. p16.
[51] Denis Carroll, *Unusual Suspects: Twelve Radical Clergy*, p40.
[52] 'Proclaimed by government as to date and manner, they were obediently celebrated by church establishments. In circumstances of political dissent such observances found mixed reception.' Ibid. p50f.
[53] The particular Fast Day declared for 16 February 1797 was to be a thanksgiving for the foundering of the French fleet off the coast of Bantry Bay in December 1796. The suspension of Habeas Corpus and a reign of excited terror by yeomen and troops accompanied it. The Anglican Bishop of Down wrote of yeomen visiting Catholics with 'every species of brutality, indignity and outrage'. Charles Dickson, *Revolt in the North: Antrim And Down in 1798* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1960) p104.
[54] 'Porter implies that the fast is not about religion as such. It is rather to benefit government – to show how the administration are friends of religion, that they serve God, that they hate hypocrisy.' Denis Carroll, *Unusual Suspects: Twelve Radical Clergy*, p52.
[55] Brendan Clifford ed., *Billy Bluff And The Squire (A Satire On Irish Aristocracy) And Other Writings By Rev. James Porter*, p72. Porter further makes clear that these Fast Days are called by government for their own ends and that to oppose, or indeed to expose, them, would have devastating consequences, 'But above all, a *general* fast cannot fail of the impressing the great body of the people with an idea that Administration are friends to religion, that they are fond of their country, that they fear God, and walk before him always, and that hypocrisy is to them a strange work. Should any man have a doubt of the truth of these advantages, it is as plain as any of the preceding causes, that he is actuated by sentiments of treason and infidelity.' Ibid. p73.
[56] 'For some years back many men in Great Britain and Ireland, of distinguished rank and talents, endeavoured to obtain a reform in the legislature of both countries, as the only means of saving the constitution and the country; but all their endeavours were in vain – in vain did they urge the justice, the policy, the necessity of the measure. They were treated with neglect and scorn, some of them were transported to the opposite side of the globe; some were tried and acquitted; some banished to America, and many immured in dungeons, without prospect of trial or relief.' Ibid. p77.
[57] 'As for us, should the flame which we have kindled in Europe, spread to the British empire, should it involve our country, our king, our constitution and ourselves, we will cheerfully perish in the conflagration, provided the blame be laid upon those who attempted to prevent us from kindling it, or to extinguish it when kindled. Such are the sentiments of many; and if they be founded in truth and reason, I would be glad to know where I can find nonsense and falsehood.' Ibid. p78.
[58] Ibid. p76.
[59] Steel Dickson was born at Ballycraigy, near Carnmoney, Co. Antrim where he received his early education from a local minister. He studied at Glasgow University, his subjects including economics, law, political theory, and theology and he carried on his studies to doctoral level. Like Porter, Dickson fitted in easily to the liberalism of Glasgow University.
[60] Denis Carroll, *Unusual Suspects: Twelve Radical Clergy*, p70.
[61] In his *Narrative* Dickson writes, 'In the year 1771, I was ordained to the charge of the congregation of Ballyhalbert, in the barony of Ardes,

and the county of Down; and became an husband and a farmer.' Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings of William Steel Dickson*, p15.

[62] Dickson participated in the ordination of Stephenson, the predecessor of James Porter in Greyabbey, who had exercised subscription scruples.

[63] Denis Carroll, *Unusual Suspects: Twelve Radical Clergy*, p72. Dickson himself writes in his *Narrative* of this time, 'Thus become stationary, I devoted myself, almost entirely, to my parochial and domestic duties, or the studies connected with them, till the commencement of the unnatural, impolitic, and unprincipled war in America.' Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings of William Steel Dickson*, p15.

[64] Ibid p44.

[65] Ibid. p58.

[66] 'Your views of doing Good ought to be generous and extensive; unconfined by the narrow Limits of party, or external Denomination, whether in Politicks, or Religion.... As our Enemies are generally of the Popish Persuasion, those of the Denomination, among us, are apt to construe Measures of public Security into private Design, and attribute every Armament to Enmity against them. To remove such injurious Suspicions is an Object well deserving your serious Attention; and your Conduct ought to shew that ye have not taken up Arms for this, or the other Denomination; but for your Country.' Ibid. p58. In his *Narrative* Dickson writes of this matter, 'The Catholics, in great numbers, and with great zeal offered themselves as volunteers, in common with their Protestant and Presbyterian countrymen. Through the greatest part of Ulster, if not the whole, their offers were rejected, and, in some places, not without insult.' Ibid. p16.

[67] Ibid. p73. Clearly for Dickson, government had been failing in her responsibilities, ' ... all civil authority is originally derived from its people; that no individual hath any right to govern but what they bestow; and, of consequence, that their protection, safety and happiness are, or ought to be, the great ends of government; and the supreme law to which all others should subordinate.' Ibid. p68.

[68] Liam Swords ed. *Protestant, Catholic & Dissenter: The Clergy And 1798* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1997) p58.

[69] 'Dickson, whose advocacy of Catholic emancipation went back to 1778, took the test of the Belfast Society in December 1791.' Ibid. p55.

[70] At the Dungannon Convention a resolution abhorring revolutionary principles and republicanism in Ireland was proposed. Dickson, however, spoke against the resolution making such an impression that he was invited to speak at the local meeting-house on the following Sunday. He spoke to a packed house, including Catholic clergy. Dickson recalls the meeting in his *Narrative*, '... I reluctantly yielded to the impulse of addressing the meeting: and as argument was unnecessary, where there was nothing like argument to answer, after what had fallen from other gentlemen, I only hung a few rags of ridicule on the step-ladder of 'gradual emancipation', which were eagerly laid hold of, and, in the heat of imagination, formed into a mantle, under which Mrs' time to time' looked so silly, that her God-fathers were ashamed of, and abandoned her. In consequence, Lady 'Total and Immediate' was adopted, embraced, and cheered.' Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings of William Steel Dickson*, p23.

[71] Dickson writes in his *Narrative*, 'Government were alarmed, or pretended to be so; and, in their alarm, whether real or pretended, gave themselves up to madness ...' Ibid. p25.

[72] In his *Narrative* Dickson writes, 'Early in March, I set out for Scotland, to visit an uncle of Mrs Dickson, who, as I was informed,

was dangerously ill. His death, and the unsettled state in which he left his affairs, detained me there, till the month of April.' Ibid. p31.

[73] 'The Synod reflecting with grief and indignation, on the conduct of some members of this body, and of the licentiates under their care, who have been lately implicated in seditious and treasonable practices, do hereby declare their most pointed abhorrence of a deportment, so highly inconsistent with the character of a Minister of religion. And they do strictly enjoin the several presbyteries within their bounds, to institute a solemn inquiry into the conduct and conversation of their respective members and probationer – to distinguish impartially between the innocent and the guilty, that the Ministry may be blameless; and to make a faithful report of their procedure, at next meeting of Synod, under penalty of severe censure.' Ibid. p111.

[74] Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings of William Steel Dickson*, p111.

[75] Denis Carroll, *Unusual Suspects: Twelve Radical Clergy*, p86. Dickson recalls the event in his *Narrative*, 'Hence it will naturally be supposed that no evidence of my treasonable practices was elsewhere treasured up, not any self-centred court presumptuously devising counsels, equally insulting to the government of the country, and ruinous to a brother; much less that such should be found in an assembly of men solemnly set apart to preside in the worship of the God of mercy, and preach the Gospel of the Prince of Peace.' Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings of William Steel Dickson*, p105.

[76] 'Dickson was active in the course of the year, taking part in the speeches at a Catholic Dinner in Dublin on 9 May 1811, probably becoming the first Irish Presbyterian minister ever to address a wholly Roman Catholic gathering.' Liam Swords ed. *Protestant, Catholic & Dissenter: The Clergy And 1798*, p70.

[77] Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings of William Steel Dickson*, p111. The *Belfast Magazine*, August 1813, recorded the decision of the Synod with the comment from the Synod, 'It is true we have condemned Dr Dickson, but as we have found him such a stiff, unyielding, troublesome sort of man, we will not have anything further to say to him.' Liam Swords ed. *Protestant, Catholic & Dissenter: The Clergy And 1798*, p72.

[78] 'While neither the government nor the Synod was able to prove the charge that Dickson had been implicated in treasonable and seditious activities or that he had held the post of Adjutant-General in the United Irish forces in Co. Down, most of the available evidence suggests that he certainly played a prominent part in the events leading up to the rebellion.' Ibid. p72.

[79] Brendan Clifford ed., *Scripture Politics: Selections From The Writings of William Steel Dickson* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1991) p5.

[80] Ibid. p65f.

[81] Pieter Tesch, 'Presbyterian Radicalism' in D. Dickson, D. Keogh & K Whelan, *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism And Rebellion* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1993) p37.

CHAPTER 3 BELONGING AND BEING:

PART 1: Thinking about how to be the Church

1. Setting the scene: a question of how to be the Church

1.1 The Church in its context

In this chapter I shall move from the question, 'Whose are we?' to consider how the Church interprets belonging to God. In a changing world where identity is called into question and its fluidity is evident, there is a resultant responsibility on the Church to translate and express its loyalty to God in a lifestyle that relativizes all other loyalties. This is a fundamental issue for the Church as it seeks to bear effective and faithful witness in a changing world, and it is a matter of hermeneutical awareness.

In this chapter I shall address how the church can be guided in interpreting loyalty to God. I shall acknowledge that scripture is authoritative but that the churches have to move to understand themselves as hermeneutical communities, communities that interpret scripture, in order to make it real, living and active in the contexts in which they find themselves. The purpose of this chapter is not to examine the credibility of the claim that scripture is authoritative but to establish that the authority of scripture is true for the churches and to examine what it means for the life and self-understanding of Christian communities. I shall argue that the churches, to be hermeneutical communities which accept scripture as normative, require boundaries for the hermeneutical task.

The field of hermeneutics is vast and it is not my intention to examine that field in detail. I will, however, seek to develop appropriate guidance for the hermeneutical task, against the backdrop of the broad field of hermeneutics. With the Reformed emphasis on *sola scriptura* it is essential to establish

that scripture is the key, central and authoritative body of texts around which the hermeneutical community gathers.

1.2 The Church and the authority of scripture

As an expression of the Church's understanding that scripture is authoritative the books of the Bible are collectively known as the, 'canon of scripture'. The word 'canon' can be traced back through its Greek origin, *kanōn*, meaning rule or measuring rod, to the Hebrew, *qāneh* with the root meaning, 'reed'. The term 'canon of scripture' denotes that particular group of writings believed to be divinely inspired and that they are a standard for faith and life.[1] Books became canonical, therefore, because they were believed to be authoritative for Christian life and belief. As Bruce expresses it, '... they were and are included in the list because they were acknowledged as authoritative.'[2] This is affirmed in *The Westminster Confession*: 'All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.'[3]

The Code of the PCI emphasizes the authority of scripture in the recognition of scripture as the supreme standard of the Church:

> The Word of God as set forth in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and the supreme standard of the Church. [4]

In Vatican II's *Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, the authority of scripture is also acknowledged:

> For holy mother church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the church itself.[5]

It is clear, then, that both the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions look to scripture as authoritative in rooting and guiding the practice and belief of the church and in order to designate the books of scripture as authoritative they are defined as 'the canon of scripture'.

How the authority of scripture is understood within different theological traditions is not a matter for this thesis. The spectrum of understanding is broad, focusing on what it means to say that scripture is inspired by God and therefore authoritative. However, a brief survey of the authority debate provides helpful background. The Reformation emphasis on *sola scriptura* led to the view that the Bible was a 'compendium of truths'.[6] Enlightenment rationalism and lower criticism[7] called this into question in the recognition of a process of transmission within scripture and thereby pointed to the inherent difficulties of accessing the original, and therefore authoritative, text.[8] Higher criticism further broadened the debate, raising questions of authorship.[9] Alasdair Heron, a Reformed theologian writing in the context of Scottish Presbyterianism, sums up what confronted orthodox understanding of the authority of scripture:

> ... the way was open to the conclusion that the Bible should simply be treated as a collection of ancient religious literature with no special claims to be heard or accepted except where it happened to express some general religious 'principle' that could be recognized as universally valid – the kernel within the husk.[10]

Agreed and general 'principles', therefore, become authoritative as the kernel of scripture with the remainder being looked upon as the husk. Clearly this was an attempt to keep the whole text of scripture related to authority but it also undermined the notion of scripture, in its entirety, as

authoritative text. Consequently, accessibility to the text via these general principles challenged the unity of the text. This challenge to the unity and accessibility of scripture's meaning has continued in the ongoing debate about how meaning can be discovered in scripture. I shall return to the issue of meaning in section 3 of this chapter. It is important, at this point, to emphasize that the challenge to what authority means has not undermined the commitment of the churches to scripture as the key, central, authoritative text in which God is both revealed and encountered.[11]

If scripture's place is agreed among the churches then there is the possibility of a common ecclesiological understanding of the church as a community of interpreters, a hermeneutical community. This common acceptance of scripture as authoritative, together with a common ecclesiological understanding, confronts the churches with the question of how the commonly accepted text functions within the life of the Christian community.

1.3 Scripture and the life of the Church

The position of the churches is that scripture is authoritative in all times and places, authority being inherent in scripture. In this respect it is argued that scripture has objective meaning. Again there is not space to closely examine this claim, but only to emphasize that in claiming the inherent authority of scripture as God's revealed Word, the churches are claiming something very particular and unique for scripture. Any attempt, therefore, by the Church to be a hermeneutical community cannot take place apart from scripture.[12] The authority of scripture is exercised over the life and belief of Christian communities as God is revealed and encountered. As culturally situated communities gather around the text of scripture they

receive its authority as they respond to what is encountered in the text.[13]

The idea of scripture as authoritative is not, then, simply a matter of there being something particular about the text itself, although that is important and expressed in the belief that scripture reveals truth about God. For scripture to be authoritative it must also affect the lifestyle of the Christian community and in this sense it may be described as 'normative' for the life of the church. Normativity involves engagement between the text of scripture and the ethical practice of the Christian community.[14] The normativity of scripture and the canon are inseparable.

Together with the belief that in scripture God is both revealed and encountered, accepting scripture as normative implies that what is understood from scripture will influence the lives of those who accept its authority. As the community reads the text, and is open to it, it discovers moral guidance, spiritual nourishment and many challenges to lifestyle and beliefs. The community must test what it discovers in the text, listening for what God reveals. The Christian community needs also to be ready to translate what it learns into a value system that shapes community life. Doubt, as much as trust, plays an important role, for the doubter assists the community to probe and uncover things previously unnoticed in the text. When doubt is brought to scripture from within the Christian community the community is engaged in the hermeneutical task.

Responding to doubt through the life of the community is one way of living as hermeneutical community. As the community's questions and concerns are expressed in the presence of the text of scripture, be they social, economic, political, personal or global concerns, so the hermeneutical task continues. What loyalty to God could mean for any community is examined and addressed in this way. For scripture to be

normative and authoritative in the life of the Christian community, it must function as that which is in conversation with the life, experience, concerns and hopes of that community. Elements of the conversation may change, but scripture remains constant.

How the meaning of scripture can be uncovered in any given situation is the problem of hermeneutics. Accepting scripture as normative and objective does not eradicate questions of culture and history. In the hermeneutical task the Church moves between the poles of world and gospel. The world is the context in which the churches must realize the gospel that is encountered in scripture. To be hermeneutical community is to self-consciously accept that faith is always interpreted and to become critically aware of influences on the interpreter. The treasure that is the gospel must always be sought after for what it is, in the words of the WCC document, 'a treasure in earthen vessels.'[15] The WCC, through its Faith and Order Commission, has paid particular attention to hermeneutical challenges and provides helpful insights. This particular study of the WCC is, therefore, the focus of the following section.

1.4 A view from the WCC

Taking words from 2 Corinthians 4 v7[16] the WCC's Faith and Order Commission addresses the issue of hermeneutics, specifically ecumenical hermeneutics, as *'A Treasure In Earthen Vessels'*. The Faith and Order text defines hermeneutics as:

> ... the art of interpretation and application of texts, symbols and practices in the present and from the past, and the theory about the methods of such interpretation and application.[17]

The Faith and Order commission here recognizes that faith is always humanly interpreted and can never, therefore, embody the full mystery of God's self-revelation. As the faith community adopts and employs the symbols, rites, stories, and practices of the faith, it communicates that faith from one generation to another and hence contextually.[18]

The Church itself is not, of course, free from ambiguity. Despite a growing and deepening understanding of one another among the member churches of the WCC a variety of different interpretations of scripture remains. The Faith and Order Commission had already noted different models for relating to scripture[19] on their journey of understanding and in the movement towards unity. But the 1963 World Conference on Faith and Order meeting at Montreal, together with Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*, were understood to be a breakthrough in the emphasis on salvation history in response to the Reformation dispute regarding scripture and tradition. At Montreal courage was evidenced in the recognition of the significance for Scripture of tradition.[20]

The breakthrough was in the courageous recognition that scripture itself contained a hermeneutical process through the traditioning that had influenced its development, and its interpretation in different ecclesial traditions. Thus at a follow-up consultation at Louvain in 1971 the commission affirmed that biblical authority cannot be separated from the interpretive process. This was reaffirmed at Lima, 1982, where it was argued that the truth of the Christian message is established for all time but in each context; and at Chantilly, France, 1985 when it was argued that recognizing context should not be written off as subjective. The ongoing debate has brought the Faith and Order Commission to its view of hermeneutics as a task both of interpretation and application in which the Church engages, encompassing a discussion about the methods used to interpret

the text and apply it in the life of the Christian community. There are clear challenges to the churches, growing in their communion with one another, as different interpretations of scripture remain. In *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, the Faith and Order Commission was careful to recognise that human interpretation could never embody the full mystery of God's revelation. Yet the challenge to resist absolutizing any interpretation and to make the gospel relevant in any particular context was not overlooked.

> Interpretation of the Gospel has to be relevant to particular believing communities in particular contexts in order to be both pastoral and prophetic. But no interpretation can claim to be absolute.[21]

Hermeneutics is, therefore, key to the Christian community not only in terms of bridging church and world but also in terms of relating to its key, revelatory text, foundational for the life and witness of the Church.[22] While the Faith and Order Commission, among others, continues the search for a *regula fidei*, it also urges that churches reflect together on differences both in interpretation and expression of the faith. The obvious diversity in interpretation, all the more evident in the information age, challenges Christians to make the faith visible in the variety of contexts in which the churches find themselves. The task of the churches is, consequently, a hermeneutical task in making the gospel more meaningful in each context, so, '[i]n this sense the mission to proclaim the Gospel in terms meaningful to people of today is essentially an hermeneutical task.'[23] This challenge is common to all the churches and presents an ecumenical challenge, for different Christian communities interpret from different contextual experiences and using different hermeneutical keys. This was clearly recognised at the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, at Santiago de Compostela, 1993:

> Churches need to make clear their criteriological principles for the interpretation of Scripture (e.g. tradition, liturgical-sacramental context, justification by faith, experience, etc.). Because the one canon of Scripture exhibits such a wealth of theological diversity, it challenges the churches to grow in catholicity by assimilating the totality of the biblical witness.[24]

To assist the churches in the task of negotiating their way through different hermeneutical approaches, an ecumenical hermeneutic is called for. The landscape of an ecumenical hermeneutic is sketched in the next section.

1.5 An ecumenical hermeneutic

From an ecumenical perspective, hermeneutics should assist the churches in dialogue with one another and aim at respect for legitimate diversity and coherence of interpretation, the reappropriation of Christian resources and the preparation of common worship resources. This involves adopting a hermeneutic of coherence. However, as each party to the dialogue comes to the process of interpretation with their own theological emphases, experiences and histories there is bound to be dispute and so a hermeneutic of suspicion is essential towards the interpreters who are themselves bound by context. Misinterpretation, conflicts and divisions will be exposed by the hermeneutic of suspicion showing more accurately the need for some coherence. It is an opportunity for the churches to address the question of the Church as hermeneutical community and as a community of churches that have themselves to be interpreted.[25]

The Faith and Order Commission affirms the hermeneutical task as the responsibility of all belonging to the community of the Church and not as restricted to a privileged group of experts. Thus the hermeneutical community is formed and reformed by its own work in dialogue with the Word of

God, assisted by the Holy Spirit. This view affirms the importance of the believing community and of that community as a significant space within which dialogue takes place. In ecclesiological terms, the hermeneutical task in which the churches are engaged is a co-operative task.[26] Vanhoozer sums up the effect that this view of hermeneutics will have on the community:

> The church should be that community of humbly confident interpreter–believers whose consciences, seared and sealed by the Spirit, are captive to the Word, and whose commentaries and communities seek progressively to embody the meaning *and* significance of the text.[27]

Hermeneutics is thus not simply a matter of seeking truths but also a matter of lifestyle expressed in openness to conversion. The hermeneutical challenge is an ecumenical challenge, for different Christian communities may interpret scripture in different ways and uncover different meaning. The hermeneutical task is often hindered by a fear of the diversity of these various interpretations of scripture, the fear often being focused on a concern that truth will be obscured or compromised. I will return to this fear later in section 3.2, but the clear challenge from Faith and Order for those seeking to live in fidelity to God remains, to accept the hermeneutical task as a matter of the way of life of the Christian community under the authority of scripture, or as I have defined it, as accepting the authority and normativity of scripture. For the Christian community to understand itself as a hermeneutical community and to accept this as a key ecclesiological understanding does not, therefore, undermine the authority of scripture, but rather is an expression of that authority. From an ecumenical perspective, the interpretive community, accepting the authority and normativity of scripture, is challenged to move between the

dynamic towards coherence and that of a healthy suspicion, engaging the whole community of believers and not just experts, seeing the task as one of co-operation unhindered by fear of diversity. Accepting the authority and normativity of scripture, how then does the Church develop its self-understanding in terms of a hermeneutical community?

2. Boundaried interpretive space: limiting the hermeneutical scope

2.1 Insight from scripture

From the beginning of the Christian Church a debate persisted about how the church should relate to the cultural conditions in which it found itself. It was precisely the challenge of being a hermeneutical community. The 'Council' of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15 and Galatians 2, points to some of the dilemmas raised by the question of the church and its relationship to culture. These dilemmas were an expression of the church living as a hermeneutical community, seeking to live the gospel within the cultural circumstances of the day. At the Jerusalem debate, controversy focused on how Gentiles could be admitted to the Christian Church, a church that had remained true to its Jewish heritage, following the practices of circumcision and the observance of ritual food laws. It was an inevitable controversy, resulting from the spread of the church outwards from Jewish territory into Gentile areas where many responded to the good news of the gospel and were baptised. Gentile conversions posed a problem for the Jerusalem leaders as the Gentile believers, '... were becoming Christians without also becoming Jews. They were retaining their own identity and integrity as members of other nations.'[28]

How the council at Jerusalem would handle this issue would be of great importance for the future of the Church. There is a way in which this gathering to debate can be

understood as a prototype of the later, more formal ecumenical councils. At Jerusalem those in debate reached a unanimous decision to permit Gentiles to become part of the Christian Church without first becoming Jews. Their unanimous decision was tempered with the suggestion that, for the sake of their brothers and sisters in Christ, they should observe, at least in part, the food laws. John Stott[29] writes of the radical and pivotal nature of the conclusions of the Council of Jerusalem:

> Its unanimous decision liberated the gospel from its Jewish swaddling clothes into being God's message for all humankind, and gave the Jewish-Gentile church, a self-conscious identity as the reconciled people of God, the one body of Christ.[30]

The Council of Jerusalem had ruled on the church's relationship to the world, and different cultures, and not everyone was satisfied. In both the Galatian and Corinthian correspondence[31] ongoing debate was recorded. Yet despite the dissent, it was clear that, as far back as the days of the New Testament Epistles, it was recognised that account had to be taken of the different worlds in which the church found itself. The gospel had to be witnessed to and embraced in a manner appropriate to people in their own place.

The early church, as attested in Scripture, took account of its cultural setting. The church of today cannot refuse to take account of its changed and changing setting, for, in the words of Karl Barth, '[t]he Christian Church does not speak from out of heaven. It speaks on earth and in an earthly way.'[32]

In section 3.1 I shall return to the matter of context and the urgency with which the churches must pay heed to the context in which they find themselves as a matter both of the effective witness of the churches in the world and of faithfulness to the scriptural witness. Here it is important to note that the scriptural witness holds together different strands of thinking and permits

interplay of meaning and variance in understandings. In the light of those different views, ways have to be sought to live an effective witness as the living community of believers. In seeking to live effective witness as the community of believers today, and with a commitment to being hermeneutical community, the interplay of meanings and strands of thinking in scripture have to be recognized. Scripture attests to the necessity of the church as hermeneutical community, engaged in the task of interpretation through dialogue and the interplay of meanings grounded in cultural, multicultural and international settings.

2.2 Interplay and interpretation

The recognition of different interpretations as valid and the necessity of their dialogue together in the search for truth and an effective, dynamic and relevant faithfulness to God, can raise the fear that the authority of scripture will somehow be undermined, not least because the interpretation of some will be considered invalid or heretical by others. It is important to recognize both dialogical space and boundaries to that space. The boundaries uphold the authority of scripture while the dialogical space enables conversation to take place. Aware of this, Vanhoozer develops an understanding of the meaning of 'canon' that holds together an understanding of scripture as authoritative while at the same time arguing that in the canon there is space within which meaning is sought. His view takes seriously the challenges of many differing interpretations and the fears of the Church that truth will be eroded into an array of equally acceptable interpretations:

> The canon of the Old and New Testaments, as well as that of the Bible as a whole, encloses a space within which texts deemed authoritative can interact and inform one another.[33]

The actual body of texts to which the Christian community turns today were not influential for the council of Jerusalem as the canon of scripture had not yet been formed. Nevertheless, the Pentateuch and the prophets would have been influential. The council engaged in a hermeneutical process to address issues of meaning and authority. Each interpretation was voiced at the council, each given the space to make their argument and then decisions were taken in the light both of what the council was committed to theologically and in light of what it was going to be possible to achieve in their particular cultural setting. They were guided by a concern about God and truth, and by a concern for one another and for one another's sensibilities.

It is clear, then, that the process of interpretation is dependent upon communication as each meaning is allowed to interplay with others. For the churches this interplay has always occurred in the light of traditionally accepted understandings within each church community and in the broader Christian context. The Christian community has always set scripture at the centre of this process, the community permitting itself to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Communication, therefore, takes place at three levels: communication with scripture, communication with the Holy Spirit and communication with one another. Around all these levels of communication a boundary is set by the common acceptance of the authority and normativity of scripture and within that boundary the interplay and interpretation takes place. [34]

Biblical scholars have shown that the gospel writers each have had their own window on the world, a window that shaped the way in which their gospel was written. I shall return to this in section 2.3., but note here that scripture scholars and scripture itself warns against too positivist an idea of the objectivity of scripture. When objectivity is aspired to at the

expense of interplay it is dangerous to the witness of the church and a denial of scripture as containing its own communicative interplay and interpretation. It is crucial to affirm that Scripture has always to be interpreted, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and within the context of the Christian community, but also that this in no way denies a commitment to the authority of scripture. While carefully affirming the authority of scripture, Karl Barth, acknowledges this interplay:

> Where the authority of the biblical witness is acknowledged, a lively confrontation and conversation will follow ever anew within the life of the Church itself and in the relationship between the Church and the world. The Bible will have something to say to the Church and, by its agency, to the world, questions to put and answers to give.[35]

This 'lively conversation', however, must veer away from absolutism while firmly holding on to the authority of scripture. But a fear creeps in, particularly among some evangelicals, that truth itself will be relativized. However, the validity of other viewpoints can be maintained and their challenge addressed in clear affirmation of the authority of scripture and the boundary it provides. Equally, the challenge from postmodernist thinkers of every hue, that claims to absolute truth are oppressive[36] is addressed by affirmation of the interpretive space. Pluralism, at the heart of contemporary postmodernism, here influences thinking to the point where every new view has not only the right to have a hearing but the right to be accepted as legitimate. [37] However, as a matter of maintaining the integrity of scripture and the authenticity of witness, boundary marking has been expressed by the Church throughout history.

2.3 Church history and interpretive boundaries

In the history of the Church there has been a concern to set boundaries for interpretation. Augustine (354-430), for

example, formulated a rule for the interpretation of allegory which stated that if a text does not teach a truth about faith or illustrate love of God or one's neighbour, then it should be understood as being figurative. If a number of interpretations have to be adjudicated then the one that most clearly encourages love of God and love of neighbour should be chosen. In his view, a number of interpretations may be possible as long as they do not contradict scripture. Augustine, therefore, sets a limit beyond which valid interpretations cannot be made. For him the limit is set by the love of God and of one's neighbour.

Aquinas (1225 – 1274), on the other hand, provided a series of guidelines to help decide which interpretations are valid. He believed that an interpretation is inappropriate if it is not theologically grounded, if it is the creation of the interpreter, or if the author does not intend it. For Aquinas it was important to distinguish between that which is put into a text by the interpreter and that which is intended by the author and by God. Like others in the thirteenth century, Aquinas tried to analyse and clarify difference, rather than allegorise it. For Aquinas, the limits were set by the author in the text, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In the sixteenth century the Reformers were concerned to recover the original sense of the text. Their concern arose out of their judgement that the rampant allegorical interpretation in the Church of their day in fact buried the original meaning. Luther in particular spoke out against allegorical interpretation,[38] agreeing with the Antiochene School[39] that there could be a spiritual meaning only if the author intended it. He took, as a hermeneutical principle, the view that an allegorical interpretation was only valid if the text itself was allegorical.

This stance raised particular questions about the Hebrew Scriptures and the place of Christ in them. As a consequence the Reformers adopted a position in which they viewed the Hebrew

text as providing 'types' of Christ. This permitted them to accept the persons of the Old Testament as real in themselves while at the same time prefiguring the New Testament, in this way providing 'types' of Christ. The historical eras of Old and New Testament were linked by this typological method through anticipation and fulfilment. This position reflected the Reformer's Christology which claimed that the literal[40] meaning of scripture was made known in the story of Jesus Christ. This view, however, gave the impression that Christianity had superseded Judaism, undermining it as a faith-tradition in its own right. Nevertheless, the Reformer's Christology indicates that in different eras the Christian tradition has made different theological emphases and these have provided boundaries for interpretation. How context influences interpretation within these boundaries remains an issue for the Christian hermeneutical community, and it is to the relationship between context and interpretation that we now turn.

3. Context and interpretation: rooted in hermeneutical community

3.1 The Church and cultural setting

How far proclamation of the Gospel should take account of cultural setting remains a bone of contention largely for those who fear that taking account of culture will compromise the gospel. This question is of particular importance for those evangelicals who, in the Calvinist tradition, espouse the doctrine of predestination. They draw their outlook directly from Calvin and from his more conservative followers. In *The Institutes* Calvin elucidates the doctrine of predestination:

> The predestination by which God adopts some to the hope of life, and adjudges others to eternal death, no man who would be thought pious ventures to deny.[41]

This has clear implications in considering the witness of the church in any particular cultural setting, for against this theological backdrop taking account of context is irrelevant as only those chosen by God can respond. *That* the gospel is proclaimed becomes more important than *how* the gospel is proclaimed. Another difficulty arising from the centralizing of the doctrine of predestination, as evidenced by Afrikaaner Calvinism, is that some nations or races may understand themselves to be more 'elect' than others. In this way culture becomes intimately connected with perceived truth and the gospel is proclaimed through particular cultural and privileged vehicles. In Northern Ireland, it may be argued, the Orange Order has been understood by some to be one of those privileged, cultural vehicles through which the truth is proclaimed and defended. The aligning of the Protestant faith with political outlook is seen in Fraser Agnew's reflections on the Twelfth of July celebrations which recall the defeat of James II, by William III at the Battle of the Boyne. Agnew is a well-known unionist and a former mayor of Newtownabbey. He writes,

> I look upon the Twelfth of July as an outward and visible sign of my faith and politics. The Protestant way of life that I believe in is the only way that any society can be free and democratic. The alternative would not provide for civil and religious rights. Instead it would provide a recipe for an authoritarian and autocratic way of life.[42]

Ian Paisley Jr., a member of the Democratic Unionist Party but not of the Orange Order, also recognizes the religious and political connections of the Orange Institution.

> Customarily accused of triumphalism, the Twelfth is a religious thanksgiving. … Politically the Twelfth offers a restatement of aims and motives and the opportunity to pledge and rededicate loyalty to our country.[43]

If difficulties regarding privileged cultural interpretations and their interconnections with particular religious traditions are to be resisted, it must be agreed that scripture requires interpretation by the whole community of believers, a community that will always include more than the privileged group will allow. There is more in depth discussion of this matter in Chapter Five where theological reflection is offered regarding God who is at work outside the Church. In the same way, God may be said to be at work outside, as well as within, any privileged group, for God is the God of all cultures as was acknowledged in Chapter Two, section 4.2.

Both the Reformed and Roman Catholic Church recognise that scripture requires interpretation. *The Westminster Confession*, while recognizing that scripture contains the, 'whole counsel of God,'[44] states that:

> ... there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian providence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed. [45]

The Catholic Catechism states that:

> Thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the understanding of both the realities and the words of the heritage of faith is able to grow in the life of the Church.[46]

If evangelicals, and Calvinists who set the doctrine of predestination as central in particular, are to be persuaded of the importance of listening to theories about the world in which we live then scripture must indicate the validity of this practice. Scripture is authoritative, the final court of appeal in evangelical theology, and only scripture can adequately enter the evangelical

realm as a means by which to challenge cherished beliefs. This, for the evangelical, is what the reformation motif of *sola scriptura* was all about. *The Westminster Confession* describes the function of Scripture, '... to be the rule of faith and life'.[47] Boice is helpful here in pointing to the importance of scripture but also acknowledging how it is to be approached openly by those who hold it in high regard:

> The Bible is something more than a body of revealed truth, a collection of books verbally inspired of God. It is also the living voice of God. The living God speaks through its pages. Therefore, it is not to be valued as a sacred object to be placed on a shelf and neglected, but as holy ground, where people's hearts and minds may come into vital contact with the living, gracious and disturbing God.[48]

Such a view of scripture, when placed alongside the doctrine of predestination indicates the need for the churches to understand themselves as 'hermeneutical community'. While some may be chosen and while scripture is inspired by God and normative, scripture is also God's living speech to church and world and hence it has to be interpreted. Barth emphasizes the centrality of the message as received in scripture while at the same time acknowledging the context as impinging on the thinking and behaviour of the church.[49]

Accepting context into the realm of consideration does not deny the pre-eminence of scripture, but when scripture is accepted as normative it still has to be spoken into the context in which the church finds itself. Is there not a consequent danger of every interpretation seeming valid simply because it is contextually relevant? A brief overview of the history of hermeneutics is helpful at this point to provide an overview of the hermeneutical boundaries of interpretation and the limits that have been upheld against the claim that every interpretation is valid if it is culturally relevant.

3.2 A brief history of hermeneutics

Once context is accepted into the interpretive framework a problem arises in the variety of interpretations that become possible, particularly as it seems to challenge the authority and normativity of scripture. Both the integrity of scripture and the relevance of scripture to each context are at stake in a hermeneutical approach to scripture. A hermeneutical approach, an approach now reaching across all academic disciplines, seeks to interpret scriptural texts in terms that are relevant to context, drawing the power of the gospel into the situation in which any Christian community finds itself. It also seeks to take into account the presuppositions and ideological or cultural predispositions of the interpreting community. Hans Georg Gadamer has wrestled with the terms of this dilemma in a way that has attained classical status and he argues that this is a task particular to theologians.

> Genuine speaking, which has something to say and hence does not have prearranged signals, but rather seeks words through which one reaches the other person, is the universal human task – but it is a special task for the theologian, to whom is commissioned the saying-further (*Weitersagen*) of a message that stands written.[50]

He recognises interpretations already shaped and formed, which influence further acts of interpretation and which are shaped by experience.[51] Paul Ricoeur too notes that interpretation is a problem because each attempt at interpretation takes place from within a particular setting.

> If exegesis raises a hermeneutic problem, that is, a problem of interpretation, it is because every reading of a text always takes place within a community, a tradition, or a living current of thought, all of which display presuppositions and exigencies ...[52]

The hermeneutical task, therefore, is not only one of interpreting into contexts and cultures, but also one of interpreting out of the constraints of contexts and cultures. This level of hermeneutical awareness suggests an instability which may appear to some to challenge claims to absolute truth.[53] The great danger of the hermeneutical approach, particularly to the Church in its conviction that it has something special and particular to say to the world, is that truth is replaced by ideological or religious preference. If truth is deposed in favour of preference then the question of interpretation becomes central for the Church seeking to found its life on God's revelation in scripture through which it encounters God. If Scripture has no objective, independent meaning, but depends entirely on interpretation and if each interpretation is only one among many, then whether or not God can be encountered in the biblical text becomes an issue. If all interpretations are equally valid then the God encountered in scripture may be nothing more than a projection of ourselves.[54]

Ricoeur, from his conviction that, 'Christian hermeneutics is moved by the announcement which is at issue in the text,'[55] resolves the difficulty by recognising interplay between author, text and reader.[56] This hermeneutical circle invigorates the interpretive process to move towards encountering the God who is not merely a projection of each human standpoint. However, if the focus remains on the interpreter alone then a question is raised about where meaning lies and where it can be discovered.

Emphasis on the interpreter is no more fraught with difficulty than the Reformers' emphasis on the author. Beginning with the Reformers, biblical interpretation was concerned with the author and the meaning intended in the text by the author. The view was later clearly articulated by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who argued that when an author's

view is discovered and recovered then a text can be understood. But this focus on the author raises difficulties when there is uncertainty as to who the author is and how the author's intention can be retrieved and understood. In the age of the author, meaning was believed to reside in the author's intention, thus fixing the meaning. The value of this position was that it emphasized a meaning beyond the reader's interpretation, but just how genuinely this meaning could be accessed remained questionable.

For the Christian Church there is a close relationship between author and authority, given that the Bible is understood as divinely inspired. While there is agreement on the authority of God there is less agreement about who has the right to speak for God, or whom God privileges to speak authoritatively. The debate about scripture as the inspired Word of God has evidenced this problem throughout the history of the church. Vanhoozer therefore correctly acknowledges that, '[d]isputes about authority quickly turn into disputes about interpretation and about who determines which interpretation is correct.'[57] It may also be acknowledged that disputes about interpretation can equally become disputes about authority.

Focusing, then, on interpreter and author is problematic and with the rise of biblical criticism, in the 1940s, and a new focus on the text, it became clear that this too was problematic. Initially, the focus was on historical and form criticism, but by the 1960s, the focus had moved to the literary and linguistic conventions of a text. Knowledge of the text had already become established as a key to discovering meaning. Knowledge about the text became so important that an authoritative interpretation of the text became the quest. However, by the 1970s and 1980s there was a reaction to the removal of meaning from author and reader and the according of it to the text. This led, in turn, to a further shift towards understanding the role of

the reader. The text became important only in terms of how it was viewed by the reader.[58] Known as, 'reader response theory,' different approaches have been taken providing a spectrum of understanding of what it means to emphasize the role of the reader. The tendency is for conservative thinkers to argue that the text invites the reader to participate while more radical thinkers believe that the reader takes the initiative in questioning the text. The result is an array of interpretations, within the space boundaried by scripture. It is the task of the church to authenticate or reject interpretations, wherever the emphasis may be placed, in order that what is announced in the text may be discovered. However, the task of adjudicating between an array of interpretations remains. In his explication of his understanding of the hermeneutical circle Ricoeur argues that hermeneutics is, 'neither behind the text as the presumed author nor in the text as its structure, but unfolded in front of it.'[59] Paul Ricoeur recognizes that in the interplay between reader, text and author an array of interpretations is possible. However, this does not mean that every interpretation has equal validity.

> ...if it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal and may be assimilated to so-called 'rules of thumb'. The text is a limited field of possible constructions.[60]

If the text has a limited field of interpretations, then given the concern of the Christian community to maintain the integrity of truth as understood in relation to God's revelation, adjudicating between interpretations is crucial.

3.3 Adjudicating between interpretations

One of the greatest hazards for the churches, when they accept the reality of a space in which there is interplay in search of meaning, is that one group or another will lay claim to

authority, thereby claiming that their interpretation is more authoritative than anyone else's. The question becomes one of how to decide or adjudicate between different interpretations, given that each interpretation has a right to be involved in an interplay of interpretations as the community seeks to discern the meaning of scripture. The churches in Ireland are engaged, as churches in other places, in the task of discerning the meaning of scripture. Formally this is done through bodies such as the Irish Inter Church Meeting, but informally at the level of local clergy groups, groups convened by the Irish School of Ecumenics, and in many other ways.

At the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal, 1963, precisely this question of the relationship between Tradition, as the gospel itself transmitted in and by the Church, tradition, as the process by which the Tradition is transmitted, and scripture, was raised. Care was taken to emphasize that Tradition preceded scripture, influencing the formation of the canon and thereby pointing to the importance of tradition and the Bible as the treasure in which God's word is to be found.[61] Acknowledging the need for interpretation, close examination of what constitutes 'right interpretation' was made.[62]

In different traditions the criteria for what constitutes right interpretation have been differently set down. In the Roman Catholic tradition the criterion is met by the role of the magisterium as guardians of the deposit of faith. In the Reformed tradition, the formulation of Confessions of Faith has served to provide criteria outside of which right interpretation cannot take place. There is convergence on the belief that it is the Tradition that is sought but divergence on what interpretation of that Tradition actually is, and what purposes it may be serving in a given situation.

A hermeneutical problem continues to present itself and was expressed at Montreal in terms of, 'how we can reach an adequate interpretation of the Scriptures, so that the Word of God addresses us and Scripture is safeguarded from subjective or arbitrary exegesis.'[63] The Commission recognizes the difficulty of coming to an agreed position given the diversity between different traditions, their distance from one another and the variety of cultural contexts in which Christian communities exist and have developed. If, however, some agreed standard or boundary cannot be found there is always the danger of absolutism, of one tradition identifying itself as the Tradition.

The fact that distance and diversity remain a problem, and hence that absolutism is an open trap, was evidenced at Montreal, for no movement could be made beyond the boundaries agreed by the WCC at Toronto in 1950, about its own nature and purpose. [64] At Montreal the best that could be done was to acknowledge the one Tradition, but a diversity of traditions. As an attempt to affirm a common boundary scripture was set as the hermeneutical priority:

> Although embedded in the life and times in which it is given written form, Scripture, as inspired testimony, provides a measure for the truth and meaning in human stories today. In this sense, hermeneutical priority belongs to the Word of God, which has critical authority over all traditions.[65]

At Montreal it was noted that scripture is itself a product of Tradition and a traditioning process and the boundary which scripture provides was affirmed as having hermeneutical priority. The claims of any one group or hermeneutical tradition are delimited by the priority of the Word of God. Dialogue becomes an opportunity for conversion to a greater truth while affirming that it is the whole community of believers, though

with different roles and tasks,[66] that are involved in the hermeneutical task. Speaking as hermeneutical community becomes part of both the pastoral and prophetic task of the church seeking, faithfully and relevantly, to interpret the gospel.[67] How, then, does the hermeneutical community approach scripture?

4. Hermeneutical community: the Church's self-understanding

4.1 Reading scripture as a way of transformation

For the Christian community, therefore, scripture remains the key, central and authoritative text around which the community gathers in the hermeneutical task. In this task the community occupies the space in which interpretations can come into interplay with one another in the search for meaning from scripture that is dynamic, relevant and true to what is announced in the text. If a church is to understand itself as a hermeneutical community, how then should it think of itself as it comes to read the text of scripture?

Anthony Thiselton is helpful with his assertion that the reading of scripture can have transformative effects. He argues that there are three aspects to that transformation.[68] Firstly, the text itself provides new horizons for readers thereby opening up new space beyond the reader's own horizons.[69] Thiselton draws on Gadamer in his argument that this transformation is only possible if the horizon of scripture is respected as distinctive from that of the reader. The space between reader and text thus performs a hermeneutical function and enables the reader to see beyond her own horizon. Thiselton adds to his new horizons for transformation the conviction that all that has gone before need not be rejected in the search for transformation:

> The concern that biblical reading should be eventful, creative, dynamic and transforming, should not be

> interpreted as the kind of iconoclasm which simply sees all Christian tradition as negative. Reading does not constantly destroy and break up traditions.[70]

Rather, Thiselton views tradition itself as firstly providing continuity and stability and secondly as itself moving, 'under the pressures of creative questioning and new contexts.'[71] In this way the tradition of interpretation can supply both continuity and development to the Christian community. It is important to note that the shadow side of tradition is seen in the institutionalization of culturally influenced beliefs. Yet it may be said that in the creative reading of scripture, with the questioning that arises from new cultural challenges and needs and mindful of the stable tradition of interpretation, within boundaried space, transformation is possible. That everyone who occupies the interpretive space needs to be included is one of the inescapable realities for churches seeking transformation.

4.2 Inescapable realities

If transformation of the Christian community is possible through its interpretive task, then one of the inescapable realties faced by the interpretive community is the inclusion of all that occupy the boundaried space. For example, within churches there are those bound together by one tradition but who differ on less central issues of doctrine and they are faced with the challenge of including minority views.[72] To illustrate this inescapable reality Elisabeth Schüssler- Fiorenza's reflections on a feminist critical method for interpretation are helpful. Viewing the text of scripture as androcentric, as evidenced in its language, choice of texts, dearth of stories about women and by women, for example, Schüssler- Fiorenza situates the core of God's revelation in, 'the life and ministry of Jesus and the movement of women and men called forth by him.'[73]

Schüssler- Fiorenza thus moves the text in its androcentric nature a step away from the locus of God's revelation. She does not deny the authority of scripture, but is urgent in her awareness that the text is largely silent about the history and theology of women. The silence is an inescapable reality which itself has to be interpreted. Schüssler- Fiorenza argues that the silences should not be used to shore up androcentrism but should be drawn into the interpretive process.[74]

Schüssler- Fiorenza here reveals her willingness to take the text seriously and indeed to accept it as both authoritative and normative. Key to Schüssler- Fiorenza's feminist model is her view of what, historically speaking, scripture represents. She argues that scripture should not be understood as an historically accurate document, although it may contain instances of historical accuracy. The very nature of scripture as revealed text, a pivotal belief in the evangelical community, more than hints that historical record was not the only, or indeed the central, concern of biblical writers. Schüssler- Fiorenza views the historical significance of scripture in its demonstration of what the Christian community believed to be the important things about God, themselves and the ongoing relationship between God and themselves.[75] But she goes a little further in that she also takes seriously the hermeneutic, in her view an androcentric hermeneutic, at work within the text itself and revealed in its silences.

Her commitment to an imaginative, feminist reconstruction of historical reality enables Schüssler- Fiorenza to adopt a critical ethos, and to approach the text from a new angle which represents, in her view, a 'feminist transformation'.[76] Having accepted the boundary which scripture provided for the hermeneutical task, Schüssler-Fiorenza finds herself able to move deftly around the

interpretive space finding doorways into scripture that increase the possibility of interplay and interpretation and deepen the encounter of the Christian community with a God who cannot be constrained by human supposition.[77]

Schüssler- Fiorenza's search for a feminist critical method elucidates realities, inescapable realities, for the interpretive community. Firstly, the reality of a hermeneutic at work in the formation of the canon; secondly, a hermeneutic at work in scripture itself; and thirdly, the necessity of taking seriously all of what is contained within the boundaried space, speech and silence, visible and invisible groups, those at the centre and those at the edge of the space. Others will read scripture from different places and different experiences,[78] but all move within the same boundaried space to encounter, understand and have their lives shaped by encounter with God, who is not constrained by human supposition. Together these groups make up the broad and diverse hermeneutical community operating within space boundaried by scripture and scriptural living. In a secularizing, pluralist world, the challenge to the churches as hermeneutical communities is to negotiate their loyalties, in particular their loyal openness to God's transcendence, in situations of conflict and contested space, taking account of hermeneutical horizons and their connection to a transformative process in, for, and with the world. In Europe and North America today the context is one of secularism and pluralism which brings particular challenges to the Christian hermeneutical community. Northern Ireland, and indeed the whole island of Ireland, is faced with the same challenge of negotiating loyalties, taking account of hermeneutical horizons, and reading scripture as a way of transformation.

4.3 Secularism, pluralism and hermeneutical community

Living loyalty to God above all other loyalties invites the churches into an awareness of the contemporary context. In Europe and North America the context is one of rising secularism and increasing pluralism. As secularism and pluralism bring their challenges to the churches there emerges a need for a new certainty in terms of guidance for the church's hermeneutical task. The need for guidance becomes more important given the variety of understandings of society that are currently under debate. Society has been understood by some to be in a new stage or era and this they have designated 'postmodernism'.[79] Others argue that, while changes have taken place, there has not been a radical break with the past and so elements of both modernism and postmodernism inform their understanding of society.[80]

All would agree that something significant has happened and this is well summed up by Frances Fukuyama as 'The Great Disruption'.[81] Fukuyama speaks of the historical pattern of stability and disruption in Western society, seen in socio-economic or political shifts such as the Industrial Revolution, and more recently, since the 1960s, in a move away from manufacturing into the Internet age in the 1990s. This has been accompanied by a social unravelling as evidenced by a rise in inner city crime, the breakdown of the traditional family unit and a mistrust of institutions. In this technological or information age, as opposed to manufacturing age, the physical is replaced by the mental, women move more and more into the workplace, family as it has traditionally been understood is challenged and the result is a 'culture of intensive individualism'.[82] But Fukuyama goes on to argue that a consensual, reweaving of social cohesiveness and vitality is in turn provoked by each disruption. In the history of the churches, for example, concerns regarding issues of justice and

social cohesion have changed and shifted with the needs of the time and place, for example, Shaftsbury's concern with the employment of children, the Salvation Army's concern about alcoholism and its impact on family life. Achievements in different historical eras open the way for churches to reform themselves and address new issues of justice as a concern of their ethical living and mission in the world. The significance of the shift in the twentieth century, Fukuyama's 'great disruption', presents the churches with a new, but ever-recurring challenge.

Clearly, then, something has happened in the context in which churches find themselves and the need for the churches to translate loyalty to God into this new context, named by some as the 'technological'[83] age, becomes all the more pressing as the 'culture of intensive individualism' defies community activity. The challenge is further compounded for the churches by secularism in which there is an increasing lack of understanding of the religious terminology, symbols and traditions that have sustained religious expression. The ability of religion to provide a norm for the organization of society is, therefore, eroded. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland's Mission Statement (See Appendix B – *Mission Statement of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*) acknowledges that there is a challenge here to the life of the church that calls for reflection on methods of communication:

> GOD CALLS US TO WORSHIP HIM with our whole lives,
> meeting together in groups large and small
> and gathering especially on the Lord's Day
> for the preaching and study of His word,
> the celebration of the sacraments
> and the offering of prayer and praise with reverence and joy,
> using language, form and music appropriate
> both to Scripture and to our time and culture.[84]

PCI recognizes the church as a bridge between the gospel and the world, acting as interpreters, transmitters and witnesses to the gospel in a manner that can be understood and consequently responded to. The 'culture of intensive individualism' also moves scripture away from a sense of being part of history. So the Church finds itself bridging the gap between church and world both diachronically and synchronically. This bridging task is, for the Church, immense, but must not be avoided.

4.4 The Church as a bridge

To understand the Church as bridging the gap between gospel and world is in no way to seek to limit God's action in the world to the Church. Neither should the world's response to God be understood to be contained within the life of the Church. Karl Barth acknowledges the importance of the Church listening to the world not only as a means of understanding the context in which it must live the gospel but also as the place from which God's call is heard:

> The Lord can surely let the world say something to the Church from time to time, which the Church must allow the world to say to it. [85]

The act of bridging is, in its very nature, an acknowledgment of the existing rupture and an act of discerning and interpreting what God is calling church and world to. Bridging is a hermeneutical act. The image of bridging is a means of understanding how to be the Church living in loyalty to God above all other loyalties in the contemporary context.

A biblical paradigm of Fukuyama's cultural narrative is found in accounts of great disruption such as Exodus and Exile. In his reflections on the Psalms, Walter Brueggemann reflects

on the situation of the world and the Psalmist's response as representing different aspects of experience encountered by those who seek God and, consequently, on how loyalty to God is lived contextually.[86] The Psalmist experiences moments of orientation, disorientation and new orientation, always reaching for an understanding of God in relation to present experience. Useful for our consideration is what Brueggemann writes regarding the continuing declaration of the faith in times of disorientation. He notes that the faith can still be declared but if no account is taken of the context then that declaration becomes incapable of communicating the news:

> It is a curious fact that the church has, by and large, continued to sing songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disoriented. … It is my judgement that this action of the church is less an evangelical defiance guided by faith, and much more a frightened, numb, denial and deception that does not want to acknowledge or experience the disorientation of life.[87]

While singing songs of orientation is an act of boldness in declaring faith in God no matter what the circumstances, argues Brueggemann, it is equally the case that such a declaration may be a denial of the present reality. For Brueggemann genuine boldness is in bringing the context into discourse with God. To bring context into discourse with God is to begin to struggle with how to be the church, bridging the good news of the gospel into the world, both knowing God and making God known and also searching for God afresh in unsuspected places. Bringing the context into discourse with God is the beginning of interpreting the good news of the gospel; it witnesses creative loyalty to God in that context. In this way the Church is to understand itself as hermeneutical community.

5. Conclusion: the Church as hermeneutical community

In this chapter I have attempted to explicate the hermeneutical process which enables the churches to negotiate and rediscover their belonging to God in the world. In the context of this thesis this is specifically to explicate how to negotiate primary allegiance to God in a competitive field of other loyalties, particularly where there is ethnic conflict and contested space. I have argued that for this task the churches must understand themselves as interpretive communities. This understanding is rooted diachronically in the recognition of an interpretive process in scripture and the history of the Church. I have taken seriously concerns about emphasising interpretation which may lead to compromising truth, thereby undermining what is announced in the text and believed to be God's revelation. This concern about the focus on interpretation is addressed by affirming the historical concern for boundary marking. Scripture is the common boundary for the churches but in history other markers have been set down. In the Irish Presbyterian tradition the boundary markers are explicated in *The Westminster Confession*, which I shall consider in Part II.

However, having taken boundary markers seriously it is also important to take interpretive space seriously as an arena of moral activity. Without interpretive space where discussion, dialogue, and interplay between meanings occur, there is no hermeneutical process within and between the churches and the churches morally and theologically undermine themselves as communities of interpretation. In Chapter Four I will turn to the matter of imperfection in the life and witness of the churches, particularly in their relationships with one another. This is to address the question of relationships within the hermeneutical space and will be examined through the issue of interchurch relationships. In Ireland, relationships between the churches have waxed and waned from openness to one another,

to separation from one another. With an increasingly evident pluralist and secular culture in Ireland, fixations with differences between the churches appear to be less and less relevant to people who have little to do with the churches. Indeed, for many within the churches who are concerned that effective witness be made to Jesus Christ, these differences are believed to be a luxury that can be ill afforded. PCI has been engaged in formal dialogues with other denominations, but the picture, which will be examined in the next chapter, is one of moving in and out of those formal relationships. Informally and locally the story can be radically different.

The notion of boundaried, but open, interpretive space has implications for churches, bearing witness where there is division and separation, and raises a question about what witness is given by the public, formal relationships, or lack of relationships, between the churches. But before Chapter Four, I will explore the idea of boundaried interpretive space within the Irish Presbyterian tradition through consideration of the subscription controversies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as controversies about who had the authority to set boundaries around interpretive space for the denomination.

[1] F. F. Bruce notes that the earliest Christian use of the word canon to mean the gathering of divinely revealed documents is by Athanasius 296 – 273. F. F. Bruce, *The Books And The Parchments: How we got our English Bible* (Basingstoke, England: Pickering & Inglis, 1984) p86.
[2] Ibid. p87.
[3] *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1979) Chapter 1, Paragraph 2.
[4] *The Code: The Book of Government of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (Belfast: Church House, 1980, reprinted with amendments 1997) Section 1, Paragraph 10, p10. The authority of scripture is accepted not only by the Reformed churches, but also across the denominations, as is recognised in the *Catholic Catechism*, 'In Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength for she recognises it not as a human word, 'but as what it really is, the word of God.' *Catechism Of The Catholic Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 1994) 3.104.
[5] 'Dei Verbum: The Dogmatic Constitution Revelation' paragraph 11 Austin Flannery O.P. ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1995) p104f.
[6] Heron acknowledges the significance of the Reformation emphasis on *sola scriptura* arguing that it, '... led on in later generations to a widespread belief among orthodox Christians that the Bible should be looked upon as a compendium of truths directly revealed by God, inerrant and totally consistent in all its parts, and thus the supremely authoritative source of information not only on points of doctrine but on any other matters on which it might touch.' Alasdair I. C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1980) p5.
[7] Lower criticism is also known as textual criticism. It is the term given to the process of examining manuscript copies of ancient or medieval literary works to produce a text that is as close as possible to the original.
[8] In the Enlightenment period, rationalism challenged the dominant view of scripture as a compendium of truths. Scientifically, new understandings of the universe presented by Copernicus, Galileo and Newton appeared at variance with the biblical creation stories. In the field of biblical studies, lower criticism revealed variant readings of the text due, in large part, to the process of transmission. Orthodoxy replied to this problem with the contention that the real meaning of scripture was in the original text. The difficulty was in accessing the original text given the challenges of science and biblical studies.
[9] In the nineteenth century, higher criticism's literary and historical analysis was only to compound the problem as it attempted to separate historical material from legend and poetry. Ultimately this led to questions of authorship, some arguing, for example, that it could no longer be accepted that *Isaiah* had only one author.
[10] Alasdair I. C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology*, p5.
[11] The emphasis here is to argue that the canon of scripture is authoritative for the Christian community. This is not to say that all the churches will agree in their interpretation of the commonly accepted authoritative text. Clearly that is not the case, as evidenced by the differing theological emphases of different Christian communities. But it is to say that churches agree that scripture plays an authoritative role in the Christian community and draws the community into encounter with God.
[12] Vanhoozer sums up the importance and centrality of scripture for the churches, influencing their understanding of God and the life of the Christian community. 'The Bible remains an indispensable source for understanding Western life and literature of the past. For members of the church, the Bible is an indispensable source for living wisely in the present as well.' Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text? The*

Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1998) p38.

[13] '... the notion of a canon implies that these prescribed texts also prescribe ways of living insofar as they identify what is of permanent value to human beings.' Ibid. p165.

[14] Simone Sinn notes the challenge of the task arising from the different concerns of churches in different situations and, therefore, the complexity of the task of connecting scripture and ethical life. 'The situations that constitute some of the biggest challenges for the reflection on ecclesiology and ethics today are those in which churches are in one way or another in conflicting national tendencies.' Simone Sinn, *The Church as Participatory Community: On the Interrelationship of Hermeneutics, Ecclesiology and Ethics* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2002) p17.

[15] WCC, Faith & Order Paper 182, *A Treasure In Earthen Vessels: An instrument for ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics* (Poland: Orthdruk Orthodox Printing House, 1998).

[16] 2 Corinthians 4 v7 'But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.'

[17] Faith & Order Paper 182, *A Treasure In Earthen Vessels: An instrument for ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics* (Poland: Orthdruk Orthodox Printing House, 1998) p8.

[18] 'This transmission takes place within the ambiguities of human history and the challenges of daily Christian life.' Ibid. p7.

[19] At the Faith and Order Commission meetings at Lausanne 1927, Edinburgh 1937, and Lund 1952 seven different models for relating to scripture had been identified – Tradition, the Creeds, Confessions of Faith, Reason, Experience, Authoritative teaching, and Personal faith or Inward Light. Anton Houtepen notes: The criteriological positions with regard to a rule of faith varied from *sola scriptura* (the Scriptures alone) to *testimonium internum Spiritus sancti* (the inner and personal witness of the Spirit), with all kinds of appeals to forms of *magisterium* (the teaching authority of the church) in between. Anton Houtepen, 'Hermeneutics, Mission and Ecumenism' in *Exchange* vol. 24 1995 no. 2 pp91-110, p96.

[20] 'The oral and written traditions of the prophets and apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit led to the formation of Scriptures and to the canonization of the Old and New Testaments as the Bible of the Church. The very fact that Tradition precedes the Scriptures points to the significance of tradition, but also to the Bible as the treasure of the Word of God. WCC, Faith and Order Paper 42, *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963,* P. C. Rodger & L. Vischer eds. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964) p51.

[21] WCC, Faith & Order Paper 182, *A Treasure In Earthen Vessels: An instrument for ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics,* p31.

[22] It had already been argued at Bangalore, 1978, in the report entitled, 'A Common Account of Hope,' that, '[t]he unity of biblical truth, reflected in the very plurality of the biblical witness, must be remembered.' Ellen Flesseman-Leer ed., *The Bible: Its Authority And Interpretation In The Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC publications, 1980) p10. Bangalore was particularly significant in reflecting the various stances that denominations took, as its report was compiled from the response of local study groups to the Faith and Order Commission's study initiated in 1971, 'Giving Account of the Hope That Is in Us.'

[23] Faith & Order Paper 182, *A Treasure In Earthen Vessels: An instrument for ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics*, p8.

[24] Faith & Order Paper 166, Report of section II: Confessing the one faith to God's glory, III.18, Thomas F. Best & Günther Gassmann eds., *On the*

way to fuller koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994) p241.

[25] 'As a hermeneutical community, the Church also submits itself to being interpreted by the ever-challenging Word of God.' Ibid. p10.

[26] 'To speak of the Church as a hermeneutical community is also to say that this community is a proper locus for the interpretation and the proclamation of the Gospel.' Ibid. p33.

[27] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge*, p467.

[28] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990) p241. It is clear then, that the Jerusalem leaders faced the challenge of accepting Christianity as good news for the whole world and not just as a reform movement within Judaism.

[29] John Stott is an English, evangelical Anglican whose thinking on mission and evangelism is particularly respected in the evangelical community.

[30] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p241.

[31] Galatians 2 & I Corinthians 10.

[32] Karl Barth, *God Here And Now,* trans. Paul van Buren (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964) p107.

[33] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge*, p134.

[34] In the Reformed tradition there has been an emphasis on scripture as its own interpreter, 'The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself; ...' The *Westminster Confession of Faith,* Chapter 1, Paragraph 9. Described by Barth as, 'God's word expounds itself,' Karl Barth, *God Here And Now* trans. Paul van Buren (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964) p51, the weight of this emphasis has been to clarify that God's revelation in scripture is complete and nothing can be added to it. *The Westminster Confession* sums it up, 'The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.' The *Westminster Confession of Faith,* Chapter 1, Paragraph 6. *The Westminster Confession* is making the claim that scripture is objective in itself and this claim has led to a tendency among some to simply restate belief, without reference to the contemporary historical context or acknowledgment of the context in which *The Westminster Confession* was written. As a consequence, both the internal dialogue of scripture and the dialogue between context and scripture have been suppressed. If scripture's objectivity is emphasized at the expense of its living interpretation then simply restating the words of scripture is sufficient to make God known. Such repetition of scripture without reference to the context is to take no account of the questions scripture asks of itself, or the questions that scripture asks of God, or indeed of the process of interpretation, particularly by the community's leaders, attested to in scripture. The Psalmist, on more than one occasion, calls out to God asking why he has been forsaken. The children of Israel, despite being chosen by God, often found themselves in frightening circumstances where they turned to other gods, exhibiting a human tendency to move away from loyalty to the one God and having to be called back by their leaders. The leaders became interpreters for the community. In the New Testament, Paul's letter to the church at Rome is an exposition, at such times, of the difference between living under the law and living under grace and an application of these new principles for the early Christian community. In other words, Paul's letter to the Romans was interpretation for the early Christian community. The objectivity of

the truths held in scripture remained, but did not suppress the need to explicate for the community and for the community to develop their lives in relation to their understanding of God. Objectivity and interplay were held together, neither obscuring the other, but each enhancing the other and enabling the Christian community to shape their lives within their particular circumstances.

[35] Karl Barth, *God Here And Now*, p55.

[36] 'If the challenge of postmodernism invites the transposition of issues of truth and argument into questions of power and rhetoric this becomes a fundamental issue for theology.' Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1995) p9. Bonhoeffer too attacks any manipulation of truth by the church as a tool for power. To permit manipulation is to concede the place of Jesus Christ in the world, to the world.

[37] 'The idea that all groups have a right to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and have that voice accepted as authentic and legitimate is essential to the pluralistic stance of postmodernism.' David Harvey, 'The Condition Of Postmodernity' in Charles Jencks ed., *The Postmodern reader*(London: Academy Editions, 1992). Interpretation becomes everything with truth or truth claims not entering into the debate. To understand the church as hermeneutical community goes some way to answering this concern by permitting dialogue or interplay of meaning, a space in which meaning is sought. The view of the church as hermeneutical community equally answers the concern of the Church to maintain truth. With the affirmation of the authority of scripture as providing objectivity beyond an array of interpretations, boundaries are set for interpretation and the dangers of 'anything goes' are checked. The authority of scripture is maintained with the view that the authority of scripture provides a boundary to the space in which meaning is sought and interpretations made.

[38] Allegorical interpretation had already shown the dangers of its extremities in the teaching of the Gnostics that permitted the interpretation of texts at will.

[39] The Antiochene School arose in Syria in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. It is best typified by Theodore of Mopsuestia who argued that the task of the Biblical commentator was to explain scripture in relation to context. The text is, therefore, known in history and history is the forum of God's self-revelation. The reader is ultimately directed to God through history.

[40] Literal here should not be confused with literalistic. A literalistic interpretation is, '... one that insisted on staying on one level of ordinary usage, even when another level is intended.' A literal interpretation is one that, '... can include figurative senses, if they are intended.' Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge*, p117.

[41] John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983) Book 111, Chapter XXI.5. Calvinism begins with the belief that salvation is God's gift. This view was formulated in relation to the monk, Pelagius, who was understood to teach that salvation could be earned. Calvin, like Augustine before him, asserted that human beings are helpless to achieve their own salvation. The salvation of an individual is entirely God's gracious decision. When the gospel is preached and some respond positively it is because God has predestined some for salvation, but not others. 'If we are not ashamed of the gospel, we must confess what is plainly declared. God, by His eternal goodwill, which has no cause outside itself, destined those whom He pleased to salvation, rejecting the rest; those whom He dignified

by gratuitous adoption He illumined by His Spirit, so that they receive the life offered by Christ, while others voluntarily disbelieve, so that they remain in darkness destitute of the light of faith.' John Calvin, *Concerning The Eternal Predestination Of God* trans. J. K. S. Reid (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1961) p58. James Boice, an Evangelical Presbyterian, affirms predestination as indicating that only some are elected to salvation: Redemption begins with God's electing foreknowledge of his own people, his predestination of them to be conformed to God's image – his choice of material and the blueprint. Predestination further includes his call to these elected ones to salvation, their justification through the work of Christ and their glorification as a result of which God's purposes with them are finally and totally achieved. James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations Of The Christian Faith: A Comparative & Readable Theology*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986) p139f. Placing great emphasis on the decrees of God, some in the Calvinist tradition have focused on God's decree that some should receive mercy while others receive justice. It has been repeatedly argued that predestination is not the central pillar of Calvin's doctrinal system and that to give it central place will skew how his theology is understood. J. K. S. Reid, in his introduction to the translation of Calvin's treatise on predestination, writes: 'Those who know him only or primarily as author of this doctrine will certainly fail to appreciate him as theologian. For the theologian can in fact be assessed only when it is realised that, alongside of a God who for His glory apportions equally the lot of both the redeemed and the rejected, there is also presented a God of grace; and that it is Calvin's delight to set forth God in this light and his custom to do so at much greater length.' John Calvin, *Concerning The Eternal Predestination Of God*, p9. It is easily forgotten that Calvin affirmed that God's eternal will, including that of predestination, could not be known until the last day. Calvin wrote: 'When the last day dawns, as Augustine says, there will be seen in the clear light of wisdom what pious faith now maintains before it is seen as manifest knowledge, that the will of God is certain, immutable and most efficacious, and that there are many things which it is able but does not will to do and nothing which it will and is not able.' Ibid. p185. It was Theodore Beza, Calvin's follower in Geneva, who first set the doctrine of predestination as central.

[42] Fraser Agnew, pp4-6, in, Gordon Lucy & Elaine McClure, eds., *The Twelfth: What It Means To Me* (Lurgan: Ulster Society Publications Ltd., 1997) p4f.

[43] Ian Paisley Jr., pp125-127, Ibid. p126f.

[44] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, Paragraph 6.

[45] Ibid. Chapter 1, Paragraph VI.

[46] *Catechism Of The Catholic Church*, 1.94.

[47] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter I, Paragraph 2.

[48] James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations Of The Christian Faith: A Comparative & Readable Theology,* p48.

[49] 'Because it is free grace, the proclamation of the Church cannot begin with some sort of human need, concern, care, lack, or problem, nor may it take from these its content or direction. Rather, in the face of all these, it may and must announce God's glory, His justice, wisdom and kingdom.' Karl Barth, *God Here And Now*, p30.

[50] Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem (1966)' pp3-17, Hans-Georg Gadamer, David E. Linge ed., *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 1976) p17.

[51] 'There is always a world already interpreted, already organized in its basic relations, into which experience steps as something new, upsetting what has led to our expectations and undergoing reorganisation itself in the upheaval.' Ibid. p15.

[52] Paul Ricoeur, Don Idhe ed., *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989) p3.

[53] With its emphasis on interpretation, epistemology has fallen victim to the need for relevance. Christian truth claims have, since the Enlightenment, taken on an absolutism that theories of interpretation challenge. 'Hermeneutics has of late exercised certain hegemony over other disciplines. We now look at hermeneutics not only as a discipline in its own right but especially as an aspect of all intellectual endeavours. The rise of hermeneutics parallels the fall of epistemology. Instead of making robust claims to absolute knowledge, even natural scientists now view their theories as interpretations.' Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge*, p19.

[54] Vanhoozer sums up the challenge: 'The world is a picnic to which the interpreter brings the meaning.' Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge,* p21.

[55] Paul Ricoeur ed. Don Idhe, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, p389

[56] Ricoeur recognises the importance of discovering what the text announces and, therefore, the role of the reader in relation to the text. 'I can only, in effect, approach a text if I hear it as it speaks to me, if I am seized by what is said through the text.' Paul Ricoeur, 'Religion and Faith' pp211-245, ed. Charles E. Reagan & David Stewart, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) p222. He also recognises the significance of the author who is culturally influenced and who, often unconsciously, imposes meaning onto the text as it is written, for, '... the cultural vehicle has imposed its own law, ... it is present in the expressions of the text.' Ibid. p220. For Ricoeur, '[t]here is a circle because in order to understand the text it is necessary to believe what the text announces.' Ibid. p222.

[57] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge*, p44.

[58] The shift was largely due to a reaction to the structuralist thesis that the text is an object apart from the reader or the author. The new emphasis was on the text in relation to the reader, response theory emphasising how the text invites the reader to participate. The reader is understood to be reading from within a social and cultural tradition, meaning being the product of interpretation between reader and text. At the more radical end of the spectrum, those propounding reader response theory argue that the text has no meaning except through the reader, and so they, '... deny that interpretations are constrained by the text.' Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in this text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge*, p28.

[59] Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) p221.

[60] Paul Ricoeur, John B. Thompson ed., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation, interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p213.

[61] 'The very fact that Tradition precedes the Scriptures points to the significance of tradition, but also to the Bible as the treasure of the Word of God.' WCC, Faith and Order Paper 42, *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, p51.

[62] 'Throughout the history of the Church the criterion has been sought in the Holy Scriptures rightly interpreted. But what is 'right interpretation'?' Ibid. p53.

[63] Ibid p54.

[64] The Toronto Statement was an attempt to set down the nature and purpose of the WCC which, while representing, 'a new and unprecedented approach to the problem of interchurch relationships,' should not use, 'the categories or language of one particular conception of the Church.' The WCC delimited its own authority in the Toronto Statement by affirming the right of the member churches to make their own decisions. It can never, and could not at Montreal, override the traditions of its members even in the search for a common hermeneutical principle. The Central Committee of the WCC at Toronto acknowledged this in 1950, '[b]ut it remains the right and duty of each church to draw from its ecumenical experience such consequences as it feels bound to do on the basis of its own convictions.' Appendix 7 'The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches' in *World Council of Churches: Minutes and Reports of the Third Meeting of the Central Committee: Toronto (Canada) July 9-15, 1950*, Conseil Œcuménique des Églises: Geneva, 1950) 84-90: p85.
[65] Faith & Order Paper 182, *A Treasure In Earthen Vessels: An instrument for ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics*, p19.
[66] Within a community of believers there are different tasks assigned to different roles. Some teach the young and some teach adults, some preach while others fulfil the role of theologian or exegete. Still others fulfil their hermeneutical task as they live lives in and by the Word. The different acts of the life of the church also express different modes of interpretation and or permitting the Word to shape and influence lives, e.g. through worship, discipleship classes, social action etc.
[67] 'Interpretation of the Gospel has to be relevant to particular believing communities in particular contexts in order to be both pastoral and prophetic. But no interpretation can claim to be absolute.' Faith & Order Paper 182, *A Treasure In Earthen Vessels: An instrument for ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics*, p31.
[68] Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, pp8-10
[69] 'The very process of reading may lead to a re-ranking of expectations, assumptions, and goals which readers initially bring to texts.' Ibid. p8.
[70] Ibid. p8f.
[71] Ibid. p9.
[72] The ordination of women could be cited as a concrete example of this within some of the Christian churches.
[73] Elisabeth Schüssler- Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: SCM Press, 1983) p41.
[74] 'Rather than reject the argument from silence as a valid historical argument, we must learn to read the silences as androcentric text in such a way that they can provide 'clues' to the egalitarian realty of the early Christian movement.' Ibid. p41.
[75] 'As a historical account of the ministry of Jesus or the life of the early churches, the Biblical writings do not tell us how it actually was but how its religious significance was understood.' Ibid. p68.
[76] Ibid. p42.
[77] In her movement around the interpretive space Schüssler- Fiorenza is careful to note that feminist methodology does not identify women as the problem but rather points to critical method as being shaped by a solely androcentric approach. It is crucial for Schüssler- Fiorenza that feminist methodology pay attention not only to andocentric text but also to androcentric methodology.
[78] For example, Asian, Black, developing world and developed world.
[79] Postmodernism is a school of thought including two broad strands designated by Rosenau as 'affirmatives' and 'skeptics'. There are nuanced

differences between the two groups, for example in their expectation of truth being discovered, in the boundaries they place in interpretation and in the level of their suspicion of authority. However, both groups agree the basic thesis of postmodernism that a new era has dawned. Rosenau sums up the common loss of confidence in the modern era: 'They argue that modernity is no longer a force for liberation, it is rather a source of subjugation, oppression, and repression.' Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism And The Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, And Intrusions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) p6. Charles Jencks powerfully identifies the postmodern break with the modern era and the reaction to that era: 'Post-modernists look to the past and future equally and position themselves in the present, seeing time as a broken continuum in need of acknowledgement.' Charles Jencks ed., 'Preface' *The Post-Modern Reader*, p6.

[80] Jürgen Habermas exemplifies this view arguing that, '[a] climate that promotes tendencies critical of modernism has arisen in virtually the whole of the Western world.' Jürgen Habermas 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project' Ibid. p167. Habermas believes the project of modernity to be related to the internal discourse of different spheres, for example science or art, but also to the distance from culture created by these discourses. It is this distance from culture that has called modernity into question but not everyone has chosen to abandon it. David Ray Griffin identifies the postmodern era as one which, rather than breaking completely with the past, enables a recovery of previous eras. He writes: 'This worldview can be called postmodernism in that it preserves many modern beliefs, values, and practices but places them on a larger framework, in which many premodern truths and values can be rediscovered.' David Ray Griffin 'Creativity and Postmodern Religion' Ibid. p378. Anthony Thiselton emphasizes that, even if Habermas's view is accepted, radical change has taken place: 'Whether or not we agree with Jürgen Habermas in doubting whether postmodernity brings 'the end of modernity', we cannot recover the lost innocence which characterized the self of modernity, let alone that of the pre-modern.' Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, p11

[81] Fukuyama's thesis is that the shift to the present information age and decline in social order connect through technology, economy and culture to result in the 'Great Disruption'. Frances Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature And The Reconstruction Of Social Order (London: Profile Books, 1999) p5*. This has had an effect on social norms that are being reconstructed through the great Disruption. Fukuyama concludes that the situation is not all hopeless. 'Our only reason for hope is the very powerful innate human capacities for reconstructing social order.' Ibid. Fukuyama p 282.

[82] Ibid. p5. Fukuyama notes the general causes of this Great Disruption to be increasing poverty, growing wealth, a product of some policies of the Welfare State, and a cultural shift including a decline in religion and increasing individualism. Ibid. Fukuyama p163. He also notes that while change was already in progress the Great Disruption increased the pace with the influence of the above mentioned causes: 'The shift away from Victorian values had been occurring gradually for two or three generations by the time the Disruption began; then, all of a sudden, the pace sped up enormously.' Ibid. p75.

[83] Ibid. p5.

[84] PCI Mission Statement formulated at the Coleraine Assembly in 1990 and reissued at the millennium.

[85] Karl Barth, *God Here And Now*, p42. Barth here notes that God's action is not limited to the Church and indeed that the Church will have to listen to the world.

[86] ' ... I have sought to consider the interface between the flow of the Psalms and the dynamics of our common life. ... I have sought for the interface between *those experiences common to us* and *the offer of faith* in the Psalms.' Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) p10.

[87] Ibid. p51.

CHAPTER 3 BELONGING AND BEING

PART II: A conversation with history

Boundaried interpretive space in Irish Presbyterianism

1. The subscription controversies

In Irish Presbyterianism the subscription controversies illustrate the role and significance of boundaried space. There were three controversies about subscription to *The Westminster Confession*. The first resulted in the setting up of the Presbytery of Antrim[1] within the General Synod of Ulster (hereafter, the Synod) in 1726, as a non-subscribing Presbytery. The second led to the formation of the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster in 1830. The third was internal to the Non-Subscribing Church, ended in 1862, and will be alluded to here, only briefly. Stewart comments upon the significance of these controversies:

> The significance of the nonsubscription controversies is that they illustrate, in dramatic form, the inherent tension of Presbyterianism, between traditional ecclesiastical orthodoxy and the right of private judgement.[2]

These controversies are significant within this thesis because they provide historical grounding for the notion of boundaried interpretive space. I have argued, in the first part of this chapter, that it is important for Christian communities to develop hermeneutical awareness and to live as hermeneutical communities. Christian communities of every tradition gather themselves around scripture, as authoritative text. The authority of scripture is realised when it becomes normative for Christian communities, shaping the lives of its members, as they interpret scripture's meaning and live it in their own context. I have also argued that different interpretations occupy the interpretive space as Christian communities seek to explicate and live in loyalty to God, particularly in situations where loyalties to other

'gods' are often demanded in terms of allegiances which aspire to make the demands on a person's life that only God can make.

However, the validity of many interpretations raises a concern that truth about God will be compromised. So while space is crucial in the interpreting of loyalty to God, boundaries are also important in guarding against heterodoxy. These boundaries are rooted within the different Christian traditions, in the case of PCI being provided by *The Westminster Confession*. It is this boundary marker which defines the limits of the interpretive space. Historically, the subscription controversies in Irish Presbyterianism provide access to concerns about who has authority to set the boundaries and, consequently, on who occupies the interpretive space. The two controversies on which I focus illustrate why boundaries are needed and how they came about, given the space that existed in Irish Presbyterianism up until the second subscription controversy and the formation of the Remonstrant Synod in 1862. The Irish subscription controversies took place against a background of wider upheavals in the dissenting tradition which will referred to in the following section.

2. Background to the Irish subscription controversies

The first subscription controversy took place against the background of the Bangorian Controversy in the Church of England and the Salter's Hill Controversy among English Dissenters. Under the reigns of Charles II and James II, the Church of England was encouraged to develop in a High Church direction. However, there remained some who sought a Low Church structure in order to accommodate Dissenters. With George I's accession to the throne, Benjamin Hoadly was appointed Bishop of Bangor, Wales, in 1715. Hoadly's views were controversial within the developing High Church structures. He believed that too much had been given into the

hands of the High Churchmen, that Bishops had ceded too much to the Civil powers and that Christ was the sole King and head of the Church. Some within the Church of England felt that Hoadly was subversive of church government and discipline. The controversy reached such proportions that Convocation was prorogued leaving clergy in the Church of England without a central body until the 1850s. Convocation in the Church of Ireland was also suppressed. The Bangorian Controversy is notable, firstly, because an Anglican bishop held the views that Hoadly did when such views were more generally associated with the Dissenting tradition and secondly, because he was protected by the proroguing of Convocation, which also precluded a split.[3]

A debate had already been in progress among English Dissenters regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, reaching a peak in 1712 when Samuel Clark published his Arian views in *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity.* Both Arian and Socinian[4] views had been spreading at the time. By 1701 the debate was also taking place elsewhere. Thomas Emlyn, the minister of Wood Street Congregation in Dublin, admitted holding Arian views and was deposed, as anti-Trinitarian beliefs were, at that time, an offence. In 1703 Emlyn was imprisoned. On his release in 1705, he went to England where he continued to spread his anti-Trinitarian views. In Ireland, subscription to *The Westminster Confession* had been required since 1698.[5] It was a Trinitarian Confession. This was reaffirmed in 1705 following the Emlyn crisis.

In 1719, a conference of Independent and Presbyterian ministers, the United Brethren of Devon and Cornwall, was convened at Salter's Hill to examine the Arian controversies. The result proposed by the Salter's Hill meeting, was that ministers should subscribe to those sections of the *Thirty Nine Articles* and *The Westminster Confession* which dealt with the

Trinity. The proposal was put to the English Dissenting community and defeated, thus splitting English Dissenters into subscribing and non-subscribing. These two controversies provided the backdrop for the first subscription controversy in Ireland. While Salter's Hill and Bangor had clear theological concerns, the first subscription controversy in Irish Presbyterianism was not so clearly theological in nature. Other significant influences from outside Ireland can be cited as helping to precipitate the subscription controversies.

Among the other significant influences from outside Ireland[6] should be listed the education of Irish Presbyterian ministry students at Glasgow University. There they encountered non-subscriptionist views and theological controversy, for example on the doctrine of the Trinity. Among those under whom they studied was John Simpson who was tried in Glasgow, 1714-1717, on the charge of teaching Arminianism. These influences were, in turn, at least partly informed by what was happening in the broader European context, in which Calvinism was experiencing challenges.[7] Evidence of this broad cultural and social context of Europe and the dissenting traditions in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland all played their part in setting the scene for the first subscription controversy. As McBride notes,

> ... it is possible to demonstrate that the doctrinal debates of the eighteenth century intersected with wider cultural and social differences concerning the nature of knowledge and the place of religion in society.[8]

Together these influences were to precipitate the subscription controversies in Ireland where agreement would finally be reached that a boundary had to be set, limiting the interpretive space and that *The Westminster Confession* would provide that boundary. However, until a final agreement was reached the interpretive space was occupied by those espousing

both subscriptionist and non-subscriptionist opinions. They managed to tolerate the tension between traditional ecclesiastical orthodoxy and the right of private judgement. The doctrine of the Trinity was not finally addressed until the second subscription controversy. When Trinitarianism was espoused as orthodox and *The Westminster Confession* agreed as setting the boundary to interpretive space those, as we shall see, who could not accept the boundary had to vacate the shared space occupied by Presbyterians belonging to the Synod.

3. The first subscription controversy

In 1705 John Abernethy[9] founded the Belfast Society for the Advancement of Religious Knowledge.[10] The Belfast Society was to be pivotal in the movement against making subscription compulsory in the 1720s, and formed the core for the group that were ultimately to become known as the 'New Lights', who were non-subscriptionist. In 1719 Abernethy published a sermon entitled *Religious Obedience founded on Personal Persuasion*, a sermon that was to mark the beginning of the first subscription controversy, as,

> [i]t was this discourse that began the unhappy controversy which continued throughout the next seven years with increasing asperity, and which called forth above fifty separate publications, and which ended in the exclusion of the members of the Belfast Society from the communion of the Synod.[11]

The views expressed in Abernethy's sermon reflected those of Benjamin Hoadly, Bishop of Bangor, that the magistrate had power to judge human action for the sake of peace but that not even the church could judge regarding the holding, or not, of particular doctrines. Such things were a matter of personal conscience.[12] Abernethy's views caused a mild dispute at the Synod in 1720 but the dispute was quickly

resolved in the attempt to avoid a repeat of either Salter's Hill or Bangor. Resolution came in the form of a Pacific Act by which the Synod allowed ministerial students to subscribe to part of *The Westminster Confession*, omitting those parts with which they had difficulty. As a substitute for what was omitted, students had to agree a form of words with their Presbytery.[13] It was an attempt to hold to the importance of *The Westminster Confession* while at the same time creating space for those who had particular difficulties of conscience, thereby enabling people of different viewpoints to remain part of one denomination. The difficulty was regarding the doctrine of the Trinity and so the Synod, recognising the dangers of the situation, passed a further resolution in an attempt to keep the church from public dispute on the matter:

> Whereas there may be Controversies started and manag'd [*sic*] unseasonably, and contrary to the Gospel Rules of Charity and Edification, and the publishing and printing such things may gender strife, and do more hurt than good; therefore this Synod earnestly obtests, and recommends to all our members carefully, and with a due regard to our own Principles, to examine all papers they intend to publish, and to act with all caution, as they will be answerable to God and their own Consciences, and as they would avoid division, and promote peace and Christian concord among us, and therefore judge it expedient, and do enjoyn [*sic*] that they consult some of the most judicious of their Brethren, before the publication of any such paper.[14]

It has to be noted that those of the subscribing party maintained suspicions that the non-subscribers not only opposed investing power in Church courts but that they also had some difficulty with the doctrines contained in *The Westminster Confession.*[15] At the same time, it should be noted that not all non-subscriptionists were anti-Trinitarian. The controversy was not yet focussed on doctrine but rather its imposition, as non-subscriptionists saw it. Yet the underlying

concern about doctrine is shown in the dispute between the Synod and Samuel Haliday, during which the 1720 Pacific Act was passed.

In 1720 the Synod admitted Samuel Haliday, who had been in London at the time of the Salter's Hill dispute, to ministry in the First Presbyterian Congregation, Belfast. Rev. John Dunlop, also in London at the time of the Salter's Hill controversy, wrote to the members of the Belfast Presbytery when Haliday was admitted to let them know that he had been suspected of Arianism. Presbytery felt duty bound to refer the matter to the Synod, which cleared Haliday's name at their meeting in 1720. The Synod,

> (r)esolv'd [*sic*], that the Revrd Mr Samuel Haliday has sufficiently clear'd [*sic*] his Innocency, and fully vindicated himself from the aspersions of Arianism, and militating against all Church Government, to the great satisfaction of the Synod.
> Resolv'd [*sic*], that Mr Dunlop be rebukt for his rash and imprudent behaviour in this affair. [16]

It was at this point, to expressly deal with the situation and any such others that should arise, that a Pacific Act was passed. However, when the Presbytery of Belfast admitted Haliday, at the Synod's direction, he refused to sign *The Westminster Confession.* His argument was that he was already ordained and was not, therefore, bound by the Pacific Act. Four members of the Presbytery objected and so the matter was brought back to the Synod in 1721. The Belfast Presbytery was seen to be acting irregularly in light of the previous decisions of the Synod and challenging the integrity of the Pacific Act as passed by the Synod.[17] Haliday declared his willingness to be subject to Synod and Presbytery and so the Synod resolved,

> ... not to resume any further consideration of this affair, but to receive M[r] Hallyday [*sic*] as a member of this Synod, overlooking any Irregularities in his Installment.[18]

The 1721 meeting of the Synod asked Haliday to give an account of why he had felt unable to subscribe *The Westminster Confession.* He explained,

> [m]y refusal to declare my adherence to the assent I gave to the Westmin[r] [*sic*] confession of faith when I was licensed does not proceed from my disbelief of the important truths contained in it ... But my Scruples are against the Submitting to Human tests of Divine truths ...[19]

Haliday's explanation came during the consideration of an overture to permit members of Synod to voluntarily subscribe to *The Westminster Confession.*[20] After some hours of debate, which included Haliday's testimony, it was agreed that the Synod,

> ... allow such as are willing to Subscribe the Westmin[r] [*sic*] Confession of Faith according to the terms of the Pacific Act or not, and the vote being put, it carried allow [*sic*] by a great majority.[21]

Those who refused the opportunity to subscribe were known as non-subscribers,[22] or New Lights[23] as opposed to Old Light subscriptionists. Their refusal was on the basis that no Synod could require them to believe any specific doctrine, and they would not, in Haliday's words, 'submit to human tests of Divine truths.' They sought unboundaried space, or space boundaried only by their private judgement and not set by fallible human beings. Fourteen non-subscribers were identified, twelve of them from Ulster. Despite affirmations of the Pacific Act, the Synod continued in generosity towards those who were non-subscribers, passing a *Charitable Declaration* which affirmed

the common membership to the Synod of both subscribers and non-subscribers:

> The members of this Synod who find it necessary to protest against comeing [*sic*] to a vote at that time concerning voluntary subscription, do declare, they charitably believe their brethren whose sentiments & practices are herein different from their own have acted according to the light of their consciences, & it was not the design of the protest to insinuate anything to the Contrary.[24]

At this point it was more important to the Synod to provide space than to identify and enforce the boundary. Believing in the importance of conscience, and not having seen doctrinal orthodoxy contravened, they remained charitable in the hope of maintaining the harmony of the church. Yet, despite such charity, the Synod recognised the dangers of unboundaried space and felt the threat of strong non-subscribing views. In 1725 it was felt best to gather all the non-subscribers into one Presbytery – the Presbytery of Antrim. An overture was brought by the Committee on Overtures:

> This Committee having the peace of this Church very much at heart, and being concerned for our lamentable divisions, do humble [*sic*] overture that this Synod do agree to appoint longer adjournments than usual, that the subscribing Bretheren and their elders, and the non subscribing Bretheren and their elders may each of them meet by themselves to consider and condescend upon such expedients as may tend to heal the divisions of this Church, and preserve the peace thereof.[25]

This was agreed and the subscribers brought their own overture, firstly that non-subscribers, 'be allowed peaceably to follow the light of their own consciences',[26] and secondly,

> that whereas the Pacific Act has been by some interpreted to indulge intrants [*sic*] into the ministry in scrupling some Doctrines as well as phrases of our

> confession of faith that it be therefore resolved by the Synod that no Preby [*sic*] shall be allowed to interpret said Act in such latitude.[27]

The overture was, 'carried approve [*sic*] by a great majority.'[28] The proposal included new Presbytery arrangements that would ensure the harmony of the church. The Presbyteries were named as Bangor, Templepatrick, Killyleagh and Antrim. The formation of the four non-subscribing presbyteries was of critical significance. While the Synod found the divisions among its members 'lamentable' and gave every opportunity for those from both sides of the debate to consider, as expedient, the healing of division and the preservation of peace, yet the dominant subscriptionist group felt limits had to be set. They clearly understood that there was more to the debate than the issue of subscription. The most significant concern concealing itself within the debate was, as I have said, a theological one. The Pacific Act had been an attempt to assuage those with a thirst for theological controversy but, in so doing, the Synod only put off the day when matters of subscription and doctrinal orthodoxy would have to be addressed. The boundary, which subscriptionists believed to be essential, was beginning to be drawn when the four non-subscribing presbyteries were formed as an attempt to secure the harmony of the church. These presbyteries remained members of the Synod with full rights as members.

Harmony was a matter of concern for non-subscribers as for subscribers. At the Synod meeting in the following year, the non-subscribers brought proposals of their own which they felt would contribute to the continuing harmony of the church. Despite the good intentions of the non-subscribers, the subscribers viewed these proposals as contravening the Pacific Act and so they responded with another overture:

> We therefore justly reject these new terms of peace contained in the propositions by which they endeavour to establish their non-declaring principle, as inconsistent with the peace and unity of this Church. And we do declare our steady adherence to our own principles, and that it is matter of deepest concern to us, that by these their principles and their declared resolution to adhere to them they put it out of our power to maintain ministerial communion with them in Church Judicatories as formerly consistently with the faithfull discharge of our ministerial office and the peace of our own consciences.[29]

This overture was, 'carryed agree [*sic*] by a great majority,'[30] and so in 1726 the non-subscribers were finally placed in a functioning Presbytery of their own, removed from the Synod, but were permitted to continue in debate at Synod meetings, to preach in Synod pulpits and also to share in communion with the Synod.[31] Exclusion was, therefore, mitigated by tolerance, but the outline of the boundary was being more sharply drawn, as the freedom of non-subscribers to move around the interpretive space was being delimited.

The central issue was not doctrinal, although for some it was crucial that the Trinity be affirmed as a central doctrine of the faith. Brown notes that the degree to which the non-subscribers could be defined as heterodox remains a matter for debate and concludes that,

> [t]he most substantial charge that can be made against them however is that the general drift of their theology was undoubtedly away from the Confession towards an Arminian position, and that after the final breach had taken place, this new emphasis became more open and obvious.[32]

For the non-subscribers the issue was, as it had been for Hoadly, whether or not a church court could decide in favour of one doctrine over another and then require its members to subscribe their belief in that doctrine. In other

words, the issue was whether or not or how far interpretive space should have boundaries. Subscribers believed that doctrines provided important boundaries and that the church had the authority and duty to define doctrines and ensure that they were preached. Non-subscribers believed that synodical power to interpret authoritatively was tantamount to Popery in the sense of the Reformation concerns about the imposition of certain beliefs. The issue of interpretive authority was in dispute. Who had the right to interpret authoritatively was perceived differently by subscribers and non-subscribers. While neither lost sight of the work of the Holy Spirit in guiding interpretation, subscribers saw an agreed standard of the church community as providing authoritative interpretation. Non-subscribers saw no need for such an agreed standard, emphasising individual private judgement, albeit tested in the community, as sufficient. Although this dispute passed off without too much disruption it indicates the Irish Presbyterian interest in providing boundaries within which interpretation could be negotiated. The majority of Synod members were concerned to delimit who could occupy the interpretive space in order to secure orthodox doctrine. However, it has to be said that,

> ... by the end of the eighteenth century there was little distinction in principle between the Presbytery of Antrim and the majority of presbyteries attached to the Synod of Ulster.[33]

At Synod level the debate was peaceable but at local level the controversy was kept alive in no small part due to the energy of elders who were as significant in debate and decision-making as ministers. McBride notes the importance of elders:

> Throughout the controversy the strength of the subscribing party was found among the lay elders who

> possessed the right to vote, it was they who had forced through the original motion for voluntary subscription in 1721.[34]

The strength of these elders was manifested locally. In some congregations with non-subscribing ministers, numbers dropped and one minister, Michael Bruce, was tried for not preaching the Trinity. In Downpatrick Thomas Nevin was tried for heresy and rebellious behaviour, while Alexander Colville had to travel to London to be ordained because his Presbytery refused to do so. Ministers from the subscribing party also suffered, particularly those who had advocated conciliatory methods. In 1724, John Orr was ordained to the congregation of Comber. He was a subscriber but had sympathy with the non-subscribing position. A large number from the congregation applied to be detached[35] but, in 1725, the Presbytery of Down refused their request. John Orr moved from the Presbytery of Down to Antrim, resulting in the congregation commandeering the Meeting House and refusing to let him in. These incidents of unrest did not, however, take away from the growing ability of members of the two parties to co-exist. In fact, by the 1800s the amicable co-existence of subscribers and non-subscribers was so prevalent that many Presbyteries in the Synod had stopped requiring subscription:

> ... it appears that in the Synod itself non-subscription was allowed to go on as before – and so the seed was sown for the second non-subscription controversy that occurred in the years 1821-1830.[36]

At this stage in Irish Presbyterianism fluid boundaries existed and while there was clearly dispute around the matter of authoritative interpretation no one contravened the boundaries of orthodoxy to the extent that radical division resulted. Rather, peaceful coexistence was opted for in a church mindful of the need to provide a united witness in a society still recovering

from the unrest that had led to the Rebellion of 1798. The existence of the Presbytery of Antrim might seem to imply a clear line being drawn between subscribers and non-subscribers. In fact, there was no such clear line. Across the country non-subscribers continued to belong to subscribing Presbyteries and the Presbytery of Antrim included subscribers, notably John Orr.[37] Greater division, however, was not far away as theological differences became more openly pronounced. While theological differences had been in the background of the first subscription controversy, they became clear at the second subscription controversy, when boundaries were definitively agreed. In the intervening years, until subscription was upheld, peaceful coexistence prevailed indicating that the issue of boundaried interpretive space became more important when matters of orthodoxy in doctrine caused concern. The time of the first subscription controversy was a time in which space was more important than boundaries, but the second controversy indicates that the matter of boundaries could not be avoided. The tolerance exercised between those who believed in traditional ecclesiastical orthodoxy and those who espoused the right of private judgement was to be tested to the limit in the matter of orthodox belief in the doctrine of the Trinity.

4. The second subscription controversy

Following the first subscription controversy unresolved differences, together with practices of tolerance among Presbyteries, eventually led to the second subscription controversy. While historical events can be named in the process of the controversy it is important to note that the controversy, 'was the convergence of several different, though not unrelated, lines of conflict,' and these made schism, according to Holmes, 'the logical conclusion.'[38]

The second subscription controversy arose in 1821 with the election of William Bruce to the chair of classics at Belfast Academical Institution. He was appointed instead of Mr Brice who had been supported by one of the fiercest opponents of the non-subscribers, Dr. Henry Cooke. Bruce, from the Presbytery of Antrim, and Rev. Henry Montgomery,[39] from the Synod, both held non-subscriptionist views.[40] The dispute within Synod brought no satisfactory solution to the problem of Bruce's appointment but the situation was exacerbated by the publication, by Bruce's father, of a piece in which Arianism was publicly owned for the first time. A Commission to examine the state of the church and Arianism was set up by government (*Irish Education Inquiry*), but it did not report until 1827.

The controversy itself was further compounded by new factors. The liberals were no longer just latitudinarian, but some were avowedly and openly Arian, rejecting the Trinity and disbelieving the divinity of Christ. The theological differences which had been in the background now moved to the foreground. On the other side, conservative fervour was fuelled by the rise of the Evangelical Movement.[41]

In 1824 the Synod adopted its first Code of Discipline. In drawing it up the committee had to face the question of subscription; they opted for either subscription or a form of words agreed between minister and Presbytery. James Elder of Finvoy proposed an amendment in favour of subscription but it fell, 'demonstrating that subscription was not a live issue in the Synod at the time.'[42] However, division remained between the Old Light conservatives who held to traditional Calvinism as expressed in *The Westminster Confession* and the New Light liberals who sought escape from harsh Calvinism through non-subscription. Bruce was a member of the separated Presbytery of Antrim but his companion and fellow campaigner, Henry Montgomery, was a member of the Synod. Montgomery,

together with William Porter the Clerk of Synod, declared themselves Arian. Theology had joined church polity in the second controversy in no uncertain terms, and was to expose a concern, which had been avoided in the first subscription controversy, for boundaries designed to maintain orthodoxy.

In 1827 the Synod met at Strabane. The growing tensions on the matter of Arianism had been fuelled by the publication of the *Irish Education Inquiry Report* in February of that year which exposed some ministers as Arian, among them William Porter, Clerk of the Synod. Some members of the Synod felt that Porter should resign as clerk and so they,

> [m]oved, that the Rev. William Porter, having publicly avowed himself to be an Arian, be no longer continued Clerk to the General Synod of Ulster.[43]

Following some debate the resolution was withdrawn but the Synod expressed, 'their high disapprobation of those statements of opinion,'[44] such as Porter had made regarding his Arian position. Those who were in favour of the original resolution felt strongly and protested that Arians should not be members of the Synod, that the religious character of the church could be injured by its officers holding such views and that the silent tolerance of the Synod was unacceptable. This silent tolerance, which had held the church together during the first controversy, was to become a source of anger for those who sought clearly marked boundaries to the interpretive space. The previously silent tolerance was replaced as members of Synod were allowed to sign their protest.[45] Forty one ministers and four elders did so.

Calls for Porter's resignation led Cooke to propose that the doctrine of the Trinity should be subscribed in terms of *The Shorter Catechism*.[46] The proposal was carried and it was agreed that, 'each Member should stand up when giving his vote.'[47]

Four members obtained permission to withdraw from the meeting before the vote was taken, one hundred and seventeen ministers and eighteen elders voted that they believed in *The Shorter Catechism's* statement, two ministers voted that they did not and eight declined to vote.

The next year, when the Synod met at Cookstown, those who had not taken the *Strabane Test* were invited to declare themselves:

> Conformably to the resolution of the previous year, such Ministers attending the present meeting, as were absent from the last, were severally called on to express their belief concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, Thirty-eight Ministers voted 'believe;' four voted 'not;' one withdrew; and three did not answer to their names.[48]

Ministers were not alone in taking the test:

> A declaration of belief, respecting the doctrine of the Trinity, was required from such Elders as had not been constituent members of the last Synod. Fifty nine voted 'believe;' fourteen voted 'not;' two protested any such question being put; and two declined answering.[49]

Cooke was not satisfied and so he introduced overtures that all candidates for the ministry should be examined by a Committee of Synod on matters of faith and doctrine.[50] The non-subscribers protested, threatening their withdrawal from the Synod if the overtures were not repealed. Montgomery and his party, seeing the writing on the wall, drew up a remonstrance, which was presented at a special meeting of the Synod in August 1829:

> ... a REMONSTRANCE was presented, complaining of the course of proceedings commenced at the meeting of 1827, when Ministers and Elders were called on to submit to a test of faith, framed in the words of fallible men; pointing out, also, the injustice and pernicious tendency of the Overtures of 1828, and urging the

> immediate repeal of those enactments, and a return to the regulations respecting admission to the sacred office, which are laid down in the Code of Discipline.[51]

The Remonstrants based their objections on matters of polity, believing that each is answerable for their beliefs, to God and not to 'fallible men'.[52] Despite the Remonstrants' objections, Cooke's overtures were ultimately upheld and a committee was appointed to confer with the Remonstrants and agree, 'terms of an amicable separation.'[53] Seventeen non-subscribing ministers withdrew and on 25th May 1830 they formed the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster.[54]

The character of the debate between Henry Cooke and his non-subscribing opponent, Henry Montgomery, indicates that the issue had moved to focus on doctrinal matters. It was on matters of doctrine that they fiercely disagreed, indicating that the Old Light, Calvinist emphasis was predominating. As a result of the formation of the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster, subscription became obligatory for ministers, licentiates and elders within the General Synod of Ulster after 1835.[55] At the same time, it has to be said that, '[t]he withdrawal of the remonstrants did not, of course, bring controversy to an end.'[56]

Locally, discontent between subscribers and non-subscribers continued, issuing at times in violence. The disputes were largely about the possession of property and were not finally resolved until the Dissenters' Chapels Act, 1844.[57] Doctrinal differences were expressed in non-doctrinal disputes, which became the site of conflict and the places where doctrine, specifically right doctrine, was believed to permit one group to take precedence over another. In this way the boundary was shown to have the potential to divide, and to affirm in some the belief that they were superior to others. It is not surprising, given the intensity of the dispute, that the corrective to such behaviour, found in an awareness of interpretive space, was at

times lost sight of. The role of non-doctrinal matters is emphasised by Davey, who notes that the schism had consequences and that not everyone's choice was determined by doctrine:

> By the schism Presbyterianism lost many persons of culture, of wealth, of public spirit and philanthropic zeal, and many again whose only fault was a personal loyalty to Arian ministers.[58]

The tension exists as one between freedom to interpret scripture with no agreed boundaries and freedom to interpret and debate within boundaries. After the schism both sides could pursue their view with greater commitment than before.[59]

While the schism was regrettable, the affirmation of *The Westminster Confession* led to the possibility of a new relationship with the Secession Synod, and a union took place in 1840.[60] This union will be part of the discussion in Chapter Four. The subscription controversies illustrate how broad space can need boundaries if orthodoxy is to be maintained, and even great charity and tolerance, especially when other, non-doctrinal factors come into play.

5. The importance of boundaries and space in Irish Presbyterianism

For over a century the General Synod of Ulster struggled with the issue of subscription. For some, particularly in the second controversy, there were significant doctrinal issues at stake. But for others the matter was not so much doctrinal as ecclesiastical. The most significant ecclesiastical issue was that of authoritative interpretation. For the subscribers, authoritative interpretation was grounded in *The Westminster Confession*, which provided a boundary to interpretive space. In upholding *The Westminster Confession*, the subscribers upheld openness which had limitations and they affirmed community rather than intense

individualism. Non-doctrinal factors were also at work, seen in concerns about property and loyalty to friends. These factors too influenced the decisions that were taken about which group to follow.

The issue confronting the broadest group of non-subscriptionists was whether or not a church court, or denomination, had the right to interpret scripture and set its own hermeneutical boundary. In the end the matter was resolved by the division of the Synod and the setting up of the Remonstrant Synod which was destined to become the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian church in 1910. But within the Remonstrant Synod a third controversy took place. This controversy illustrates the concerns of the Old Lights, presenting itself as a problem of unboundaried space even to Henry Montgomery, the great champion of non-subscription.

Henry Montgomery, former member of the Synod, became a member of the Remonstrant Synod in 1830. But he soon became alarmed by the spread of rationalism among the Remonstrant Synod's younger ministers. Latimer comments:

> The younger ministers soon grew so far lax in their theology that Dr. Montgomery was driven to advocate the use of a creed to arrest their down-grade movement.[61]

This creed took the form of a proposed *Code of Discipline* which included theological questions to be put to ministerial candidates. The proposed *Code of Discipline* was viewed by many as constituting a creed. Opposed by David Maginnis, minister of York Street, Belfast, the leader of the younger school, Montgomery found himself under such attack that he withdrew his proposal in 1863. By the time of his death, in 1865, Montgomery was, 'out of both political and religious sympathy with many of his own followers.'[62] Seaton Reid emphasises the importance of these events:

> It illustrates, in a striking manner, the value of ecclesiastical symbols. If scriptural creeds do not in every case secure an evangelical ministry, they at least check the boldness of unsound teachers.[63]

Seaton Reid here points clearly to the function of a boundary. Emphasising the need for whatever standard a denomination adopts to delineate its interpretive space to be scriptural, he notes the positive function of a boundary. In Irish Presbyterianism it was to secure an evangelical ministry. The evangelical community of ministry was a community of people bound together by common beliefs and practices, resisting the intense individualism of non-subscriptionist practice. In this way, the place of belonging was formed among people who were, by faith, a community of followers, expressing their faithfulness to God in common theological space. Boundaried by *The Westminster Confession*, this space was defined with the hope of keeping some from drifting into heterodoxy. The boundary's function in stemming any drift into heterodoxy met the concern of the community to maintain fidelity to the truths taught in scripture. The boundary, therefore, secured the space, adjudicating loyalty to God on the matter of the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity and willingness to accept the teaching of the Church.

What occurred within the Remonstrant Synod was an indicator of further theological shifts within the non-subscribing tradition and of the dangers which having no agreed boundary may present.[64] The non-subscribers continued to believe in enquiry and private judgement. They continued to stress the love of God, God's Fatherhood and initiative in Christ's work. But a change was seen in the continuing shift from latitudinarianism to Arianism, although not all were Unitarian. There was a shift in their doctrine of the Church from a Presbyterian to a Congregational understanding. Things were on

the move and some of those, including Henry Montgomery, who had argued strongly for unboundaried space, now saw the value of setting limits in the interests of purity and integrity. Crawford defines their view:

> Some of the earlier non-subscribers insisted strongly that they would not subscribe to any creed, but as they saw to what extremes of belief and unbelief the unbridled use of private judgement led, they realised that a Church must have a creed of some sort.[65]

Within the Synod there remained men who were able to subscribe to *The Westminster Confession* but, as has already been shown, there were varied views abroad on the matter. This was not to put an end to theological debate within the Synod. Over the years Presbyterianism has been known to be a broad church, not least on the matter of relationships with other churches. The historical conversation in the following chapter will indicate some of the doctrinal and theological differences that persist within Presbyterianism and show that, within the agreed boundary, there is much more interpretive space than is often allowed. *The Westminster Confession* still remains the agreed standard of the PCI, subordinate to scripture, and it is still subscribed at services of ordination and installation in the terms agreed by the Synod in 1835, as they had been set out by the Presbytery of Monaghan in 1832.

Boundaried interpretive space is the choice of Irish Presbyterians, but the emphasis remains on space. To reiterate what has been argued previously, an unhealthy preoccupation with boundaries closes down the interpretive space and troubles the church as it attempts to witness effectively in a divided world. There is a question regarding the openness of the interpretive space and about how firmly closed the boundary may be. At stake is the conversion of the Church as it engages in the process of ever-deepening faithfulness to God. This is a

challenge to the development of an ethic for engagement with the world and will be addressed in Chapter Five. The terms on which others may move in and out of the interpretive space, particularly those of other Christian traditions, will be taken up in the following chapter. However, the positive functions of boundary marking should not be overlooked. A boundary functions to prevent heterodoxy, always a concern for the Church; it also functions to help the formation of a community of people and to assist the Church in its faithful living.

The subscription controversies, while being internal to church life, have much to teach regarding the concerns of the Church in the world. In the first subscription controversy, while there were theological differences in the background, the concern about who was to decide what was orthodox, what was heterodox, and who had the right to impose such a decision authoritatively was what was at issue. In the public square this question clearly arises for the churches as they seek to live ethically and offer moral leadership from within their own traditions and teachings but in a manner which is both effective in bearing witness and holds out the possibility of transformation for the world. The resolution of the controversy showed tolerance and respect for difference, for while four non-subscribing presbyteries were formed there remained communion among the members of all presbyteries, mutual exchange of pulpits and each had the right, subscriber and non-subscriber, to engage in debate at Synod.

At the stage of the second subscription controversy the situation was more critically theological and, therefore, more critically about orthodoxy. Those arguing for a clearer position on subscription were arguing for acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity. After many years of struggling not to divide from one another, Irish Presbyterians were confronted by a significant choice: to enforce subscription and separate; or to

take a more relaxed approach to subscription and risk significant levels of heterodoxy. They chose separation, maintaining the purity of doctrine that was sought by the subscribers. This too has implications for the Church in the public realm and will have to be taken into account in Chapter Five. It is not always the case that agreements can be reached and co-existence maintained. The question must always be asked whether or not the separation is at the cost of effective witness or if, in fact, separation at times is a matter of authentic witness by all.

The issue of separation also has implications for the denominations in their relationships with one another. In a conflicted world, divided churches are challenged to seek ways of effectively bearing witness which does not undermine their own differences and at the same time does not simply provide a spectacle of factional debate for others in the public realm. The churches, therefore, face the challenge of witnessing in a counter-cultural way where there is division and dispute. This is the issue which will be addressed in Chapter Four in an examination of the churches' relationships with one another, taking account of concerns about moves towards unity and the compromising of truth. Any compromise of truth is viewed as significantly undermining the boundaries to the extent that the adjudicating principle of loyalty to God is destabilised causing a radical move away from the centre, who is God, moved radically away from. However, the churches still have to confront the matter of their witness in the world and so the notion of unity will be explored in search of different views of unity which can accommodate the concerns of the denominations to maintain their own identities. A contested or diverse understanding of unity may then sustain the churches in creative and positive relationships with one another.

In Ireland, relationships between the churches have waxed and waned from openness to one another, to separation

from one another. With an increasingly evident pluralist and secular culture developing in Ireland, fixations with differences between the churches appear to be less and less relevant among people who have little to do with the churches. Indeed, for many within the churches who are concerned that effective witness be made to Jesus Christ, these differences are a luxury that can be ill afforded. PCI has been engaged in formal dialogues with other denominations but the picture, which will be examined in the next chapter, is one of moving in and out of those formal relationships. Informally and locally the story can be radically different.

The notion of boundaried and open hermeneutical space has implications for churches bearing witness where there is division and separation, and raises questions about what witness is given by the formal, public, relationships between the churches. It is, then, to the relationships between the churches and to the possibilities open to them, that I now turn.

[1] A group of non-subscribing ministers within the Synod were eventually placed together into one Presbytery of Antrim. The Presbytery remained in close relationship with the Synod.

[2] A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster 1609-1969* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1977) p98f.

[3] It is evidence of a kind of agnosticism which existed in the Church of England at that time as to church polity and which spilled over into issues of doctrinal authority.

[4] Arians argued that the Son was divine while Socinians claimed that he had a divine mission but was not himself divine. Both were anti-Trinitarian viewpoints, in the classical, orthodox sense. Arius was a Presbyter of Alexandria in the Fourth Century. It was his explanation of the relationship of Jesus the Son to God the Father which led to controversy. He argued that Jesus Christ did not share the same eternal being as the Father but was the Father's special agent in creation and redemption. The party opposed to Arius was led by Athanasius who argued that if Arius were correct the doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement would be called into question and Jesus Christ deemed not worthy of worship. After fifty years of controversy, Athanasius' group emerged as dominant and Arianism was declared heresy. Rowan Williams, *Arius* (London: SCM Press, 1987, 2001 2nd edition) especially pp82-89 with its explications of theological aspects of boundaries, limits and power in a religious group, and the notion of 'relative pluralism,' p 90.

[5] In 1698 the Synod had required, '(t)hat young men, when licensed to preach, be obliged to subscribe the Confession of Faith, in all Articles therof, as the Confession of their faith.' *Records of the General Synod of Ulster: 1691-1820* (Belfast: General Assembly with the sanction of the General Synod of Ulster, 1897) p34.

[6] 'What is certain is that the subscription controversy in the north of Ireland was not simply an isolated event. It must be seen as part of a wider conflict between the individualism of the age of reason, and preservation of Presbyterian polity, and of reformed orthodoxy itself.' Rev. Dr. A. W. Godfrey Brown, 'A Theological Interpretation of the First Subscription Controversy' in *Challenge and Conflict: Essays in Irish Presbyterian History and Doctrine* (Antrim: W & G Baird Ltd, 1981) p43.

[7] ' ... the same latitudinarian notions of the inferiority of dogmatic belief, and the nature of religious liberty, which had obtained currency on the Continent, and in England, appeared in Ireland.' James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland: comprising the civil history of the Province of Ulster, from the accession of James the First with a preliminary sketch of the progress of the Reformed Religion in Ireland during the sixteenth century and an appendix, consisting of original prayers* (Belfast: William Mullan, 1867) p111.

[8] I. R. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) p43.

[9] Abernethy was born in 1680, educated at Glasgow University, ordained to the ministry in Antrim in 1703 and in 1730 moved to the Wood Street Congregation, Dublin.

[10] 'The members of the Belfast Society were able ministers and persuasive orators.' W. T. Latimer, *A History of Irish Presbyterians* (Belfast: Macmillan & Son, 1902) p299. 'In this society were first promulgated many opinions hitherto new in Ireland, which, being at variance with both the doctrine and constitution of the Presbyterian Church, naturally excited, so soon as they became known, much attention, and gradually created no little disaffection and alarm' James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* (Belfast: William Mullan, 1867) p113.

[11] Ibid. p117.
[12] Peter Brooke identifies the shocking nature of what Abernethy wrote, describing it as, 'A serious assault on the central Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone. Calvinism had always argued that justification was an area in which 'by the very constitution of our nature we have no liberty'.' Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism: The Historical Perspective 1610-1970* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987) p82f.
[13] The Pacific Act was a reaffirmation of that passed in 1705 and read, 'That such who are licens'd [*sic*] to preach the Gospel of Christ, subscribe the Westmin[r] [*sic*] Confession of Faith to be the Confession of their Faith, and promise to adhere to the doctrine, worship, discipline, and Goverm[t] [*sic*] of the Church, as also these who are licens'd [*sic*] and have not subscrib'd [*sic*], be obliged to subscribe before their long ordain'd [*sic*] among; which was voted, and unanimously approv'd [*sic*]: which is thus to be understood and is now practis'd [*sic*] by the Presbytries, that if any person call'd [*sic*] upon to subscribe shall scruple any phrase of phrases in the Confession, he shall have leave to use his own expressions, which the Presbytry shall accept of, Providing they judge such a person sound in the Faith, and that such expressions are consistent with the substance of the doctrine; and that such explications shall be inserted in the Presbytry books; and that this shall be a rule not only in relation to Candidates licens'd [*sic*] by ourselves, but to all Intrants into the Ministry among us, though they have been licens'd [*sic*] or ordain'd [*sic*] elsewhere.' *Records of the General Synod of Ulster: 1691-1820*, p522.
[14] Ibid. p522f.
[15] 'On the whole the evidence is against this, and, with few exceptions, individual non-subscribers were as orthodox as regards Trinitarian doctrine as their subscribing opponents.' Rev. Dr. A. W. Godfrey Brown, 'A Theological Interpretation of the First Subscription Controversy' in *Challenge and Conflict,* p29. Brown equally notes, 'The assumption that the subscription controversy can be interpreted at its face value as purely a controversy about the principle of liberty is a highly questionable one.' Ibid. p30
[16] *Records of the General Synod of Ulster: 1691-1820*, p537.
[17] 'It's Pacific Act, from the operation of which so much peace and concord was expected was violated almost before the ink that recorded it was dry.' James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p130.
[18] *Records of the General Synod of Ulster: 1691-1820*, p13f.
[19] Ibid. p10.
[20] 'Whereas several aspersions have been cast upon the Protestant Dissenters of our Communion in this kingdom, as if they had made defection from the Common Received Doctrine concerning the Essential Deity of the Son of God, by Denying His Essential Divine perfections, particularly His Necessary Existence, Absolute Eternity & Independence, which Doctrine has been always regarded by this Synod as an Essential Article of the Christian faith, and which this Synod still adheres to as such, We [*sic*], therefore, unanimously declare that the s[d] [*sic*] aspersions are, as far as we know, Groundless. And it is our resolution if any person or persons shall hereafter deny the s[d] [*sic*] Article as above Expressed by preaching or writing, or in conversation, to proceed against him or them, according to the Laws of the Gospel & the known practises of this Church, and not to own him or them as members of this Church.' Ibid. p8f.
[21] Ibid. p11.
[22] Those who refused to subscribe did so in the same terms as Rev. Iredell who, while lodging his dissent, also affirmed his commitment to *The Westminster Confession* which he had signed at his ordination, '... I beg

leave to dissent from the s[d] [*sic*] vote, and do desire that this my declaration of assent to the Westmin[r] confession of faith may be entered into the records of this Synod, as also my dissent, and also, that I may have an Extract of them under the Clerk's hand subscribed.' Ibid. p13

[23] The term 'New Light' was used by Rev. John Malcome in his printed rebuttal to John Abernethy, *Personal Persuasion no Ground for Religious Obedience*. Malcome was, at the time, minister in Dunmurry and one of the Old Light, Calvinist party in favour of subscription.

[24] Ibid. p14.

[25] Ibid. p88.

[26] Ibid. p95.

[27] Ibid. p95.

[28] Ibid. p95f.

[29] Ibid. p104f.

[30] Ibid. p109.

[31] Stewart argues that, following 1726, '... while the dangerous errors of the 'non-subscribers' rendered separation inevitable, the Synod erred on the side of leniency.' David Stewart, *The Seceders In Ireland With Annals Of Their Congregations* (Belfast: Presbyterian Historical Society, Church House, 1950) p38.

[32] Rev. Dr. A. W. Godfrey Brown, 'A Theological Interpretation of the First Subscription Controversy' in *Challenge and Conflict,* p37.

[33] Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism,* p92.

[34] I. R. McBride, *Scripture Politics,* p46.

[35] 'The Presbyterian people were much more orthodox than their pastors, and, in several cases, they petitioned the church courts for permission to withdraw from the ministry of Non-Subscribers and join others reputed to be orthodox.' W. T. Latimer, *A History of Irish Presbyterians,* p307.

[36] Rev. Dr. R. G. Crawford, 'The Second Subscription Controversy and the Personalities of the Non-Subscribers,' pp96-115, in, *Challenge and Conflict: Essays in Irish Presbyterian History and Doctrine* (Antrim: W & G Baird Ltd, 1981) p97.

[37] McBride draws a perhaps questionable distinction between the Old and New Lights. He identifies New Light ministers as men of literary accomplishment and social influence. He notes, 'It is significant that in all official dealing with the government, the Synod of Ulster was represented by Arians like William Campbell and Robert Black, who had friends in high places, or by members of the small Presbytery of Antrim.' [37] I. R. McBride, *Scripture Politics,* p59.

[38] Rev. Professor R.F.G. Holmes, 'Controversy and Schism in the Synod of Ulster in the 1820s,' pp116-133, in, *Challenge and Conflict: Essays in Irish Presbyterian History and Doctrine* (Antrim: W & G Baird Ltd, 1981) p116.

[39] Montgomery was minister of Dunmurry and Head of English at Belfast Academical Institution. 'His great object was to demonstrate the iniquity of creeds or confessions...' James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p449.

[40] 'Their strength lay in the commitment of the Synod of Ulster to the practice of Non-Subscription. Ministers of differing views could co-operate in the presbyteries and in the Synod so long as no great importance was attached to their differences.' Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism,* p148.

[41] 'The emergence of conservative evangelicalism amongst Protestants occurred simultaneously with the revival of the covenanting, Old Light tradition in Presbyterianism.' John D. Brewer with Gareth I. Higgins, *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland, 1600-1998: The mote and the beam* (London: Macmillan, 1998) p56

[42] Rev. Professor R.F.G. Holmes, 'Controversy and Schism in the Synod of Ulster in the 1820s,' pp116-133, in, *Challenge and Conflict,* p118.
[43] 'A General Synod at Strabane, 1827,' in *Extracts from the records of the General Synod of Ulster: From the year 1800 till the year 1820* (Belfast: Francis D. Finlay, 1822) p6.
[44] Ibid. p8.
[45] Ibid. p8.
[46] Ibid. p18.
[47] Ibid. p23.
[48] 'A General Synod at Cookstown, 1828,' in *Extracts from the records of the General Synod of Ulster,* p31.
[49] Ibid. p31.
[50] '... to ascertain their soundness in the faith, by requiring from them a statement of their views of the doctrines contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith.' Ibid. p33f.
[51] 'Minutes of proceedings at a special meeting of Synod convened at Cookstown, on Tuesday the 18th of August 1829; and continued by adjournments until the evening of Thursday the 20th of same month,' Ibid. p6f.
[52] 'Every minister is certainly bound to give to members of his own congregation the most explicit statements of his views of the Bible but as he is neither the teacher of his brother ministers nor of their flocks he lies under no obligation to satisfy them. To the Head of the Church and his own people alone he is responsible.' Rev. Professor R.F.G. Holmes, 'Controversy and Schism in the Synod of Ulster in the 1820s,' pp116-133, in, *Challenge and Conflict,* p123.
[53] 'Minutes of proceedings at a special meeting of Synod convened at Cookstown, on Tuesday the 18th of August 1829; and continued by adjournments until the evening of Thursday the 20th of same month,' .' 'A General Synod at Cookstown, 1828,' in *Extracts from the records of the General Synod of Ulster,* p17.
[54] 'Seventeen Non-Subscribing ministers withdrew, and, on the 25th of May, 1830, formed the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster. It is believed that many of the ministers who remained were favourable to Non-Subscribing or even to Arian opinions, but the pronounced orthodoxy of their congregations prevented their withdrawal from the Synod.' W. T. Latimer, *History of the Irish Presbyterians*, p443.
[55] A declaratory overture was presented and agreed, 'This Synod do now DECLARE, in accordance with the resolution adopted at the last annual meeting of this Body, that they will not, from this time forth, receive any exceptions or explanations from candidates for the ministry; and REQUIRE, that in future all who wish to become licentiates or ministers of this church, shall subscribe its standards in terms of the formula agreed upon at Monaghan in the year 1832, which is as follows: 'I believe the Westminster Confession of Faith to be founded upon, and agreeable to, the word of God, and as such I subscribe it as the confession of my faith'.' 'A General Synod at Belfast, 1835' in *Extracts from the records of the General Synod of Ulster,* p6f.
[56] Finlay Holmes, *Henry Cooke*, p62.
[57] 'The pain and bitterness of schism were intensified as the process of schism brought conflicts at congregational level ... These disputes, leading on occasion to physical violence and litigation, were only ended by the Dissenters' Chapels Act of 1844 ... ' Finlay Holmes, *Our Irish Presbyterian Heritage* (Belfast: W & G Baird, 1985) p102.
[58] J. E. Davey, *Centenary 1840-1940: The Story of a Hundred Years* (Belfast: W. & G. Baird Ltd., 1940) p10.

[59] 'The departure of the Arians, at the end of a series of fierce theological debates, enabled both the orthodox and heterodox wings of Ulster Presbyterianism to develop their thinking more freely. They were no longer constrained by the need to reconcile their differences in a common social structure.' Peter Brooke, *Ulster Presbyterianism,* p153.

[60] 'Regrettable though that schism was, it must not be forgotten that it opened the way for the union of the General and Secession Synods to form the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and for a restoration of full communion between the Synod of Ulster and the Church of Scotland.' Rev. Professor R.F.G. Holmes, 'Controversy and Schism in the Synod of Ulster in the 1820s,' pp116-133, in, *Challenge and Conflict,* p131.

[61] W. T. Latimer, *A History of Irish Presbyterians,* p444.

[62] Ibid. p444.

[63] James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p460.

[64] 'The history of the doctrines of the non-subscribers makes it apparent that throughout the century there were some beliefs which they held on to tenaciously, but others which they gradually relinquished.' Rev. Dr. R. G. Crawford, 'The Second Subscription Controversy and the Personalities of the Non-Subscribers,' pp96-115, in, *Challenge and Conflict,* p108.

[65] Ibid. p110. Of the non-subscribers it may be said that their influence far outweighed their size, but, '... their protest has been in some ways justified, their history and doctrinal work worthy of recording, and their labour in the Lord has not been in vain.' Ibid. p112.

CHAPTER 4 ALLEGIANCE TO GOD

PART I: Loyalty and difference within the churches

1. Setting the scene: a question of witness in a divided world

1.1 The Church in its context

This chapter aims to examine how seeking to live in loyalty to God above all other loyalties affects the life of the Church as churches. In the previous chapter, I examined the dynamics of boundary setting around interpretive space. At the centre of that interpretive space this thesis places allegiance to God, which is boundaried, in Irish Presbyterianism, by *The Westminster Confession*. Other denominations may accept the same centre, but place different boundaries around their interpretive space. There is, therefore, a question for the different denominations who express a common allegiance to God, about who can legitimately move in and out of their interpretive space and how this movement affects their boundaries. While boundaries may demarcate places of belonging, there is also a clear risk of separation which, in a divided world, may be challenged as settling for divisions rather than examining and questioning them. Thus the diachronic rootedness of the Church is challenged by openness to others. The synchronic context for the Church is a divided world, in which there is ethnic competition, cultural separation and violence. Jim Wallis, founding editor of *Sojourners* magazine, alludes to the impacts this has when he writes, 'The world isn't working. Things are unravelling, and most of us know it.'[1]

This sense of an unraveling world evokes questions of belonging and results in cynicism and despair. Walter Brueggemann sums up something of the depth of the crisis into which the Church is called to bear witness:

> The sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture. The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit.[2]

The churches provide a safe place of belonging for their various communities, but these places of belonging are at risk of becoming separatist and threatening to those who are outside the boundary. In their respective terms of self-understanding, boundary marking between the churches has been an important way, both synchronically and diachronically, of maintaining faithfulness to scripture, orthodox teaching, and an expression of denominational loyalty to God, but the question for the churches is whether or not divided witness is either distinctive or effective in a divided world.[3] It is also important for them to acknowledge the reality of co-existing truth claims in contest. For the churches, the dynamic relationship between rootedness and openness is at stake.

The meaning of the call to live in loyalty to God above all other loyalties will be explored, in relation to denominational loyalty, using conversion as the hermeneutical key and arguing that the idea of unity is itself a contested idea. If conversion is at the core of Christian identity, then contentment in denominational structures is challenged by the concept of change, *ecclesia semper reformanda.* For the churches, the parameters of change are at issue when examining loyalty to God, together with the dynamics of unity and separation. This is a hermeneutical challenge as the churches interpret their commitments in the light of their boundaries, seeking to maintain their own denominational traditions while at the same time seeking the truth through and with one another. While each denomination exists within its own boundaried interpretive space, the parameters of change expand or restrict the possibility of relationships with other denominations. Loyalty to God, it will be argued, transcending such denominational

loyalty, thereby calls churches into relationship with one another. At the same time, the integrity of each denominational boundary and its interpretive space has to be respected. If it is the case that hermeneutical communities of faith cannot relate to one another without fear of being dominated by one another, then the witness of the Church in a divided world remains a divided witness. If, however, the very idea of unity can be problematized and contested then there is the possibility of relationship without threat and the effective witness of the Church becomes one of holding in tension unity and division, difference and belonging, in one transcending loyalty. This depends on shifting notions of unity away from notions of domination and of valuing alternative models of unity which do not imply that everyone must be the same.

This method of dealing with difference could equally be considered within each denomination, for each will contain a variety of different opinions and positions within its own hermeneutical space. But as the focus of this thesis is witness in a divided and pluralist world it is important to consider how the churches relate to one another, for the relationship of the churches to one another bears witness to God and reflects God. It will be argued that division with a constant dynamic towards separation impairs the efficacy of the Church's witness, as a former Moderator of the PCI, Rev. Dr. Samuel Hutchinson, has written:

> We now realize that, whatever diversity there may be among Christians, anything other than a charitable approach is inappropriate.[4]

Or, as is recognised by *Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism, Unitatis Redintegratio*,

> ... division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the sacred cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.[5]

Vatican II clearly made the connection between division and mission, expressing the concern that a scandalized world will not be able to hear the gospel because of division between the churches. The relationship of denominations to one another, given their common commitment to Christ, is a concern for churches seeking to make Christ known. Effective witness is, therefore, at stake for denominationally bound churches.

1.2 Bearing witness as denominations

Denominational variety is an undeniable reality recognized, for example, in *The Westminster Confession*:

> The catholick [*sic*] church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and publick [*sic*] worship performed more or less purely in them.[6]

The Westminster Confession recognizes that particular denominations, are members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church and cannot contain or restrain God within one denomination. This is true even when the purity of a denomination is less recognizable than that of another. Denominational loyalty is, consequently, relativized by loyalty to God who transcends all denominational boundaries. When bound together by entrenched denominationalism, Christian communities, like ethnic groupings, can attempt to domesticate God, particularly by their claims to a greater degree of purity. When greater purity becomes the underpinning dynamic, the movement is inevitably towards separation to avoid

contamination, making it unlikely that denominations will be able to relate to one another in a way which encompasses or acknowledges difference. The invitation to relate to one another is not an invitation to ignore difference, but rather an invitation to a dynamic which is prepared to acknowledge difference and acknowledge one another. The resultant witness is stark in its ability to accept difference in a divided, conflicted and often violent world. At the same time, it is to take seriously the claim that churches belong to God and not God to the churches. In failing to live visibly within the dynamic towards unity, denominations can seriously undermine the witness of the Church by giving credence to the view that it is acceptable for one group to dominate, a view justified by believing that one group is more acceptable to God than another.

The practice of allegiance to God, therefore, posits a critique to denominationalism. In fact, the very idea of interrogating denominationalism invokes the question of truth, so much a concern for those who seek to separate on the basis of the purity issue. There is a question raised for the Church[7] about where truth lies. If truth is not possessed by any one denomination, or is only possessed more or less from one denomination to another, then the challenge to the churches is to seek the truth in and with one another as well as within their own traditions. The words of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, in the opening sermon in Edinburgh at the Second World Conference on Faith and Order, 1937, encapsulate the call to seek the truth from one another as well as within denominational traditions:

> We are here as representatives of our churches: true, but unless our churches are willing to learn from one another as well as to teach one another, the divisions will remain … Let us not forget that, though the purpose of our meeting is to consider the causes of our divisions, yet what makes possible our meeting is our

> unity. ... It is because we are one in allegiance to one Lord that we seek and hope for a way of manifesting that unity in our witness to Him before the world.[8]

Moves towards seeking the truth in and with one another necessarily involve resistance to institutionalized difference. When difference is institutionalized, the dynamics of might and right, and of subjecting error, are almost inevitable. It is, therefore, important to understand how difference becomes institutionalized and to address the destructive consequences of such institutionalization. The dynamics of exclusivism are instructive for the discussion and are brought from within the Reformed tradition by the Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf.

1.3 The dynamics of exclusivism

Miroslav Volf, the Croatian-born Reformed theologian, teases out the dynamics of exclusivism in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*. Exclusion can take the form of elimination.[9] At one end of the spectrum, the dynamic to eliminate may attempt to invalidate any other viewpoint by a variety of methods, but at the other end of the spectrum may justify the kind of ethnic cleansing that has been seen in the Balkans or in the Shoah extermination of the Jews.[10]

In more subtle form, according to Volf, exclusion by elimination can take the form of assimilation.[11] Those who are prepared to take on the faith in order to survive are assimilated and their own tradition is, by default, eliminated.[12] Exclusion does not always seek to eliminate but may be happy to dominate.[13] The minority, who do not hold to the truth, are permitted separate existence and identity so long as they do not ask equal status for themselves.[14] Finally, Volf points to exclusion by abandonment,[15] which takes no cognizance of the other, behaving as if the other does not exist.[16]

Feminist theologians too are instructive here, from the perspective of those who have been dominated. Often women, in Church and society, have known a sense of abandonment that includes the dynamics of overlooking or making invisible. In *Bread not Stone* Schüssler-Fiorenza, in her articulation of a feminist hermeneutic, argues that the key for women has been in the rediscovery of a Biblical and theological heritage in which they have a part. The silence towards and abandonment of women that has persisted has been supported by rendering women's place in the tradition invisible.[17] The consequent overlooking of women has made their domination, and sometimes outright humiliation, possible.

An exclusivist model renders others invisible in a variety of ways, as illustrated in the work of Volf and feminist theologians. In applying an exclusivist model churches run the risk of rendering invisible the truth others have and the God who is among them. It is a short step from dominance, through rendering invisible, to obliteration of others. In this way, those who persist in exclusivism that precludes dialogue run the risk of institutionalizing difference.

1.4 Denominations and institutionalized difference

Gabriel Daly, lecturer at the Irish School of Ecumenics, notes that one of the effects of reformation and counter-reformation was to 'institutionalize difference'.[18] Institutionalizing difference makes it almost impossible for Protestants and Roman Catholics to take one another's perspectives seriously as their self-definitions are bound up with excluding the viewpoint of the other. So it became difficult for the RCC to reform and for the Protestant churches to make changes in sacramental practice. Too strong an emphasis on rootedness restricts the church's capacity to be *semper reformanda.*

Using Paul Tillich's designation 'Protestant Principle and Catholic Substance', Daly submits that both of these are present in both traditions as qualitative realities. He concludes that they can be a means of recovering what has been lost through historical division. Each needs the corrective that the other provides and each needs to recognize the other within themselves. Daly is clear that truth is also at stake in the relationship between Protestant Principle and Catholic Substance:

> The motive for entering into dialogue with members of other Churches is not merely friendship, fellowship, and cooperation, important as these are. It is also to undertake a journey in search of truth, above all the truth of what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Some of that truth will come in the 'strangeness' of the other. It will often be expressed in familiar language which we will need to learn if we are to profit from our encounter with the other. It will be truth, or, more accurately, a perspective on truth which we may have hitherto lacked because it did not seem to pertain to any of our characteristic preoccupations.[19]

To put truth at stake in the dialogue between denominations is to maintain a concern for the necessary boundaries of a tradition, but also to acknowledge that there is a journey in understanding the truth in any particular time and place. It is to take account of the context in which the truth is expressed, dialoguing with one another in the search for meaningful contextual expressions of the truth. As inheritors of the truth, the task of the churches is to bear witness to the truth and not to undercut the witness of others, creating a confusion of truths and reinforcing the divisions of divided societies.

The South African theologian, John De Gruchy, picks up on the themes of principle and substance in his examination of Apartheid and its supporting ideologies and theologies in South African history. He argues that within the spheres of

substance and principle Reformed theology can have a liberating effect:

> ... Reformed theology is best understood as a liberating theology that is catholic in substance, evangelical in principle, and socially engaged and prophetic in witness.[20]

However, it is also true that in certain historical situations there has been continuity between ethnic identity and denominational tradition, which clearly places the Church on one side of the divide or another, allowing theology to support ideology, legitimizing the division and failing to challenge violence. The situation is compounded when churches find themselves on different sides of the divide, thus reflecting and supporting the divisions of the wider society, offering no cross-current in witness. These recurring historical realities strengthen the challenge to the churches to examine the overlapping of denominational configuration and ethnic allegiance.[21]

In Ireland, ecumenical critique from *The Faith and Politics Group* points to the blurring of ethnic commitments and commitment to God, which malevolently affects the witness of the Church. When there is blurring, it is unclear whether witness to God is something apart from witness to ethnic allegiance. *The Faith and Politics Group* put the implications for church life in Ireland in its strongest terms, arguing that, 'to the extent that we do not seek to recover our unity our prayers are false and our worship blasphemous.[22] In situations where loyalties are blurred it is imperative for the Church to seek united and distinctive witness. In Northern Ireland this means that churches have to try to free themselves from political ideologies in the struggle to bear distinctive and effective witness:

> ... it is very difficult to make distinctions between transcendent commitments and communal and political

> commitment. It is, therefore, not surprising that large parts of our Churches are so captive to the political ideologies of unionism and nationalism that they are unable to make a clear distinction between commitment to their faith and commitment to a particular political point of view. [23]

To attain this freedom from political ideologies is a hermeneutical task because a church infected by the divisions of the world repeatedly denies the call to live primary loyalty to God in action, lifestyle and word.[24] By rigidly holding denominational boundaries and protecting their interpretive space so that others may not come in, denominations run the risk of subverting their core commitment to God, which should shape their ethical living. If, however, integrity is to be maintained and orthodoxy sustained, is there any alternative to divided witness?

1.5 An alternative to divided witness

Having lived in a situation of pronounced division in South Africa, Desmond Tutu, until recently, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, is more than most aware of the effect a more united Church would have:

> From our experience, then, there can be no question at all that a united church is a far more effective agent for justice and peace against oppression and injustice. It may be that we will find our most meaningful unity as we strive together for justice and peace. Just imagine what could happen in Northern Ireland and elsewhere if the churches indeed speak and act as one, for religious differences have exacerbated political, social and economic differences.[25]

While it is clear that the church's witness in a divided world needs to be distinctive, it is also important to mark the fact that, in order to bear distinctive and effective witness, the

Church has to confront the effect of divided witness on an already divided world.

The focus for the churches is on the link between what they do and what they are. In the WCC the link has been made by three studies on ecclesiology and ethics: *Costly Unity*, 1993, *Costly Commitment*, 1994, and *Costly Obedience*, 1996; these were produced jointly by the WCC's Unit I (Faith and Order) and Unit III (Justice, Peace and Creation). The study process was guided by important themes that assist the churches in considering how they can bear more effective witness. The first theme in the process of preparing these studies was that ecumenical reflection and action are intrinsic to the nature and life of the Church. Any task, therefore, that the Church undertakes in the world must have an impact on ecclesiology.[26] The other guiding theme was that ecclesiology and ethics must, necessarily, remain in dialogue with one another so that the churches, as moral community, can effectively engage in moral formation. These guiding principles remind the Church that what it claims to believe and how it lives are inseparable.

The Church cannot claim overarching loyalty to God and live in unthinking or uncompromising loyalty to, for example, political ideologies. In situations of social, ethnic, economic or political difference, how the Church accepts or experiences difference is intrinsic to how the Church bears effective witness. In the divided context of Northern Ireland an integral part of effective witness is found in peacemaking, affirmed by The General Assembly in 1994 when it adopted *The Church's Peace Vocation* (See Appendix E – *The Church's Peace Vocation*). The call to peacemaking was acknowledged in a significant linkage with the affirmation that this would require meeting with those who are different, whether they be other churches or those from differing political backgrounds:

> **WE AFFIRM** that to be Christian peacemakers in our own situation:
> We must grasp more clearly the distinctive teaching of our Lord
> which challenges the general practice of our world,
> and breaks the vicious cycle of matching injury with injury,
> hate with hate, ignorance with ignorance.
> We must therefore be prepared to meet and talk together:
> with those in our own church with whom we have disagreements;
> with those from churches whose practices and beliefs differ from our own; with those from whom we are politically divided.

These crucial affirmations, made in *The Church's Peace Vocation*, have, however, to be taken alongside the fact that for some unity is problematic, smacking of assimilation, domination and the compromising of truth. An examination of the notion of unity is, therefore, necessary to ascertain if it is the supposed threat to theological purity. The history of the WCC will be used as a case study to examine the idea of unity.

1.6 The WCC provides a case study to examine unity as a contested idea

The history of the WCC will be used as a case study to point to difficulties in achieving unity, indicating that unity is itself a contested idea. As a contested idea, unity reflects the contours of the debate for the denominations who, seeking unity, are also concerned to limit diversity to that which is legitimate within the bounds of a concern for truth. The debate addresses what relativizing denominational loyalty means for the churches.

It was, at least in part, a sense of the disparity between loyalty to God and the separated particularity of the churches that led to the formation of the WCC in 1948. For the early ecumenists, commitment to unity was a cornerstone in the

desire to bear faithful witness. This is evidenced in the fact that the movement towards a formal ecumenical structure had begun many years before, largely in the impetus of the missionary movements and in the growing rediscovery of the transforming power which unity brought to witness.[27]

In this chapter, the argument will be made that if unity is itself a contested idea, then those who are prone to separate from the places where the dynamics of unity are at work, do not have to withdraw. They can become, with their own integrity, part of the debate, holding firmly to what they believe, challenging any notion of unity which seems to transgress their boundaries. It will be argued that it is possible to be both rooted and open as hermeneutical Christian communities. If unity is a contested idea, then it cannot be assumed, but is offered as a better way than the kind of separation which leads to divisive living among the churches and bears witness in a divided world to the acceptability of division. In such circumstances, the churches can find themselves drawn in as supporters of violence, even though they may not themselves espouse that path. It is, therefore, important to establish that unity is not about assimilation and domination but may be redefined and renegotiated by those who occupy the interpretive space. This redefinition and renegotiation is done in light of what belonging to God means and what obedience to God means in any given situation, and in a way which challenges hidden assumptions about what unity means. It makes for a more united witness, albeit not a singular witness, and holds out to the churches the possibility of a more credible witness, offering radical and alternative options where there is division, domination and violence. This history of the WCC and unity as contested idea will be examined in section 3. Before turning to that issue it is necessary to establish the importance of contact between the

churches, which may be defined as a dynamic towards unity. This will be done using insights from social psychology.

2. Framing the question: the challenge of social contact hypothesis

2.1 Social contact theory and ethno-political conflict

For churches to offer a credible witness in a divided society they must provide an alternative model for living with difference, a model that does not espouse separation and its destructive consequences and is not sectarian. While religious communities themselves may not advocate violence against those who are different, yet they may be used as support mechanisms for the divisions that lead to separation and, at times, violence. Religion can, therefore, play a part in the way in which separated groups identify themselves, and may become a support to sectarianism. Recognising that ethno-political conflict is, 'one of the most important threats to global security',[28] Niens, Cairns and Hewstone recognise how, in situations of ethno-political conflict, religion may be promoted by political leaders as a means of defining ethnic identity.[29] These beliefs arise from a particular social psychological approach to understanding ethno-political conflict known as Social Identity Theory (SIT). The core of SIT is summed up by Niens, Cairns and Hewstone in their claim that,

> ... individuals identify with social groups in order to increase their self-esteem by comparing their in-group with out-groups along comparison dimensions.[30]

The individual need for self-esteem in relation to others places individuals on a spectrum along which they may identify with their own group and not with the other group. The more closely the individuals identify with a particular social group the more strongly they will carry a sense of that group

into all their relationships. The key to this theory is the notion of in-groups and out-groups which have to be maintained to protect the self-esteem of the members of the in-group. Clearly this has import for situations where there is ethno-political conflict, for the maintenance of opposing groups is the maintenance of the conflict. Social categories are used to define the opposing groups, those who belong to the in-group, and those who do not. In the Northern Ireland context the definition of those groups has been along the fault-lines of religion, into which names, places of origin or schools attended have been drawn as indicators of social category. In this context, the religious categorisations are according to Catholic or Protestant, the majority of people identifying with one group or the other.

One hypothetical way of addressing the division maintained by categorising others and identifying strongly with an in-group, is through social contact. In this hypothesis, contact is posited as a means to undermine conflict by bridging the divide. Lack of contact[31] is offered as one explanation for the maintenance of conflict:

> In its most simple form, the contact hypothesis proposes that inter-group conflict can be reduced by bringing together individuals from opposing groups under optimal conditions.[32]

While contact hypothesis has been discredited as a means to effectively address division in the long term,[33] the dynamics identified in the models of the hypothesis have something to offer to our consideration of denominational loyalty. In particular, contact hypothesis may help shed light on how denominational loyalty may become focussed on boundaries, refusing to permit fluidity which enables movement in and out of the interpretive space of other groups thus supporting the bridging and breaking down of division.

Contact hypothesis has been developed into a number of basic models. The decategorisation model, represented by Brewer and Miller,[34] argues that when there is contact between individuals a distance is created from the in-group in order to promote contact with those who are different. This provides a window of opportunity to be less identified with one's own group and to examine the stereotypes and myths regarding the other group. The recategorisation into broader social categories model is represented by Gaertner.[35] From the perspective of denominational loyalty, a movement towards those who are different defined as recategorisation or decategorisation, creates critical distance from one's own group and enables more critical reflection on responsible faithfulness to God's demands. Whether or not faithfulness to God is being subverted becomes a reflective possibility, together with the identifying of impacts on ethical living which these insights provide.

A third model, the common identity model, requires a broadening of social categories to provide an opportunity for a new group definition in the form of a common in-group identity among those who have broken away from the constraints of their separated in-group. Like the other models this requires distancing from one's own in-group. What this offers to those seeking to move out from their own denominational boundaries or permit others to enter the group's interpretive space is an assurance that they do not do so alone and that they may find themselves among a new identity group. Fears of isolation and disassociation are addressed through a new place of belonging. However, anxieties about exclusion from one's own group should not be underestimated for where there is powerful ethnic categorisation, a common identity may be unrealistic, or only a short-lived possibility. The variables influencing group contact have to be taken into consideration.[36] Therefore, contact may

become a threat rather than a solution and further entrench the in-group/out-group resistance to relationship.

The contact hypothesis[37] provides a challenge to groups, particularly to denominations that are separated from one another, for, according to Cairns and Hewstone, '[a]s a psychological factor, identification with one of the two religious communities has been shown to play an important role in the maintenance of conflict.'[38] The challenge to the churches to relate to one another and be in contact with one another is clear. It is a particularly pertinent challenge given that, in Northern Ireland, community relations work is one of the strongest counter-division activities and it, 'is largely based on the application of contact theory.'[39] If, therefore, churches cannot be in contact with one another using any of the models explicated above, then they more definitely run the risk of providing credence for division and even its violent outcomes. If, however, meaningful contact occurs then trust is built, enabling reflection on one's own tradition and the tradition of others. Moving away from majority-minority feelings and building new patterns of relationship then becomes a real possibility.[40]

The dynamics of decategorisation and recategorisation provide a challenge to the churches to move out from the confines of their denominational boundaries with the intention of holding steadfastly to their allegiance to God, and embodying that allegiance more effectively by reaching into divided and conflicted contexts. Such movement enables a broadening of the interpretive space and provides critical distance to reflect on how fidelity to God has consequences for ethical living, specifically the ethical commitment of denominations to one another. In this way, denominations can resist any tendency to become identified with a political ideology, or to underpin notions of superiority, and instead to search after truth and

faithful ethical living. Afrikaaner Calvinism provides a window on the dangers, and hence the challenges, of the identification of a theological or denominational tradition with a political ideology. The warning and witness to churches in Northern Ireland from the African context is examined in the following section.

2.2 South African churches in a divided society

John De Gruchy examines Afrikaner Calvinism as a case study of how a church can become identified with a particular political ideology. He defines Afrikaner Calvinism as,

> ... a particular ideological blend of various sources that emerged within the Dutch Reformed Church in the late nineteenth century, and that dominated its life during the hey-day of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid in the twentieth.[41]

In the Cape region, ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church (henceforth DRC) were paid by the Dutch East India Company. Inevitably as a community of settlers they fell under the influence of colonial expansionism. The intersection of this political experience with the life of the church laid the foundations for apartheid. The DRC was strongly Calvinist and at the turn of the nineteenth century found itself among other denominations that arrived on the South African Cape under colonial rule. These included Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Church of Scotland Mission and the London Missionary Society. In 1800 the first Calvinist Society was formed in Cape Town by James Read, a Congregationalist and member of the London Missionary Society. As other missions arrived they brought with them different forms of Calvinism, but each retained its separate identity and emphasis.[42] The emphasis of the DRC on the Calvinist Confession, mixed with that of Dutch pietism, Scottish Evangelicalism and the experience of living on

the Cape, led to the decision of the DRC Synod of 1857 to divide their congregations along the lines of race. The rationale was that it was good missiological practice. A wider interpretive space and a more thoughtful examination of the effects of establishing divisive congregational or denominational boundaries might have at least helped to prevent the future fractured contextual character of South African society.

The DRC remained the dominant Reformed tradition in the Cape. Their internal division along the lines of race and the political reality of Afrikaner power, contributed to the development of a particular understanding of Afrikaner history as being 'sacred history'. Themes such as the chosen people and Exodus became connected to Afrikaner history so that by the 1930s the dominant hermeneutical key for reading Afrikaner history was that of sacred history. The DRC's interpretation of scripture and context provided biblical images to support Afrikaner nationalism so that by 1948 theological support for the National Party's apartheid proposals was well in place. Self-critical reflection was not on the agenda:

> There was, in fact, little self-critique in the light of Scripture, and, in the righteous republican euphoria of achieving power and restructuring society, an almost total lack of critical consciousness of the oppression which Afrikaner Calvinism was legitimating in the name of the Christian faith.[43]

In the South African context Reformed theology was, 'guilty of a twofold sin: it failed to prevent apartheid and it succeeded in sanctifying it.'[44] The situation arose because the theological perspective became so closely allied with one particular political group that it could not forsake that group to hear even the critical witness of scripture. The imprisonment was mutual, theology to ideology and ideology to theology.[45]

While not every strand of Reformed theology on the South African Cape supported apartheid, it is important, for the purposes of this thesis, to note how theology and ideology can become linked in a dangerous interdependence which supports non-integration and non-contact perspectives. Such a situation challenges churches in places where there is division to take seriously the loosening of denominational boundaries as an opportunity to move from the entrenchment of division and separation. This loosening of denominational boundaries is not an attempt to undermine or compromise their integrity but rather to enable them to be permeable enough to allow movement in and out of the interpretive space in order to reflect on allegiance to God and prevent that allegiance from being subverted by the connection between theology and political ideology. However, in order for any reformed tradition to take dialogue with, as opposed to separation from, other denominations seriously, scripture must be seen to support such dialogue. In effect, scripture, while including dynamics of separation, can also be viewed as the record of a dialogue and, therefore, as including the dynamic towards engagement.

2.3 Scripture as the record of a dialogue urges dialogue among denominations

In the Foreword to the 1985 WCC study on *The Bible and Dialogue with People of other Faiths*, Hans-Ruedi Weber asserted that, '[t]he Bible is the record of a great dialogue.'[46] If it is true that the Bible records a dialogue between God and humanity, then dialogue can provide a theologically and scripturally justifiable matrix for developing denominational identities that are shaped in dialogue with God but also with one another.

Record of a great dialogue the scripture may be, but it is largely a dialogue with one people, the children of Israel. While it is true that God, from time to time, involved those who

were not of the chosen people, for example King Cyrus of Persia,[47] yet, one must concede, the preponderance of dialogue is between God and God's own people. The New Testament bears witness to a similar situation in which dialogue with God continues, this time with members of the early church.

Need the churches in their denominations, then, be anything other than exclusive in their relationships with one another? Exclusive denominations relate to one another as if truth was situated solely within their boundaries, and an exclusivist Church relates to the world as if truth is situated solely within the bounds of the Church. If the witness is from exclusive denominations then the witness of the churches is a divided witness, reflecting the divisions of the world into which it speaks, acts and lives.

In the context of Northern Ireland, where conservative evangelicalism is a powerful force shaping people's identity, appeals to the Hebrew Scriptures to support exclusivism and dominance are many.[48] The Joshua story provides one oft-quoted example of how Christians can draw on the traditions of the faith to justify domination.

According to the narrative, following the long years after the Exodus from Egypt, the children of Israel came to the land of Canaan. Under the leadership of Joshua they prepared to enter the land that God was giving to them. Taking the land was a complicated military operation. (Joshua chapters 1-12) The shocking violence of the account points up the evil (the obliteration of another people) which can be associated with the pursuit of good (the setting up of a new Kingdom for God's people in their new land). This evil is justified, it is claimed, by the words of God interpreted by Joshua to the people:

> By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the

> Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites. (Joshua 3 v10)

Observing closely the traditions of their faith, the children of Israel prepared themselves to take possession of the land. They faced the walled city of Jericho which was closed against them. As Joshua contemplated his strategy, the commander of the Lord's army (3 v14) came to be with him. With God on their side, victory belonged to the Israelites. The plans were set and the strategy developed. The marching began around the walls of Jericho until, on the seventh day, the decisive move against Jericho was made:

> Shout! For the Lord has given you the city. The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. (Joshua 4 vv16-17a, 21)

The act of destruction was a ritual act, separating those who had God on their side from those who had not. The story illustrates exclusivism at its most stark, but this should not blind the reader to the wider dimensions and expanse of what was going on. Canaan was politically and spiritually unstable and God's people were heralding a new age. The sense of being chosen, and of being given a task by God, in this case heralding a new age, was the hermeneutical key employed to justify the destruction of those who were different. It points to the need for an awareness of the narrative's hermeneutic. In a context of contested space, a hermeneutic seeking justification for the destruction of difference readily adduces the Joshua story.

If exclusivism is the price exacted by scripture to affirm a denomination, then those outside that denomination can only be called on to turn themselves to the truth. For insiders, the conversion process is seen to be complete. But

those committed to *sola scriptura,* significantly the denominations arising from the Reformation, run the risk of undermining their own position by a selective reading of the text. They may overlook the threads within the Joshua story that point beyond exclusivism, in particular the commitment to the heralding of God's new age for all. Despite this, while those threads exist they are, on their own, it seems to me, insufficient to sustain a dialogical relationship between the denominations. Other scriptural dynamics need to be taken into account if a hermeneutic of inclusion is to be sustained.

2.4 Employing a hermeneutic of inclusion

The Joshua story[49] has to be read alongside and in tension with other threads in scripture. Declarations of Israel's superiority (Zechariah 8 v23), for example, are challenged by Isaiah's view of peace established non-violently (Isaiah 2 vv2-4). The prologue to John's gospel portrays Christ as the cosmic Christ.[50] Sections of Ephesians and Colossians also offer a critique of any view that seeks to contain God solely within the Christian community.[51]

Scripture itself holds the tension between universalism and exclusivism.[52] The gospel growing in the whole world is affirmed alongside the gospel that disciples are to proclaim to the whole world. Passages that declare God at work in the whole creation point to a model that not only proclaims the truth but which also listens and searches for the truth.[53] If all things are within God's care and are sustained in life that is God's gift to the world, then the human family is one in its being created by God and dependent on God.[54] So too, different denominations may be understood as being places in which God is at work and hence there is a real possibility of people from different denominations moving in and out across one another's boundaries in a dialogical relationship. Through

this movement, allegiance to God and how that allegiance is understood and the impact it makes on ethical living, is deepened in the commitment of the churches. This openness to others and movement across denominational boundaries, raises the question of how theological integrity can be maintained and not used to underpin division. It is to this concern that we now turn.

2.5 Division, theological integrity and denominational relationships

In the Northern Ireland context, in some sections of the religious community, the idea of contact with other denominations is viewed as smacking of an unsavoury desire for unity. There are genuine theological differences and these are the focus of those who resist contact. As Morrow, Eyben and Wilson note:

> For many, the theological differences between Catholicism and Protestantism make it almost impossible for them to relate directly on theological matters. Many prefer to accept the undesirable results of protecting difference to the potential costs of engaging with others.[55]

If, as in South Africa, there is theological support for a policy of non-communication, or extremely limited communication, between the churches then the witness of the churches is to deal with difference by separation and bear the weight of the consequences. But such a position needs to be probed. Anti-Catholicism, as a strand within the Protestant tradition, bears examination; the search for a supporting theology illuminates, for the churches in Northern Ireland, the ways in which theology can feed ethno-political division. Higgins and Brewer identify the close link between some

Reformed theologies and the divided situation in Northern Ireland:

> The conviction held by some Protestants that anti-Catholicism is a fundamental tenet of their faith fits seamlessly with, and even helps to reinforce and maintain the lines of social cleavage in the North, which themselves are a cornerstone of the conflict.[56]

Anti-Catholicism is not monolithic but, as described by Brewer and Higgins, takes three active forms.[57] The authors conclude that when religion plays a part in anti-Catholicism there is a common belief that the Roman Catholic Church is in error, to one degree or another. Anti-Catholicism may, in this mode, be defined as,

> ... the determination of attitudes and practices by negative beliefs about individual Catholics, the Catholic-Church as an institution or Catholic doctrine, which results in these negative beliefs being invoked as an ethnic boundary marker, which can be used, in some settings to represent social stratification and conflict.[58]

The results of anti-Catholic belief can be seen in ideas, for example in negative stereotypes of Catholics, in individual behaviour such as harassment of Catholics, and in social structure where there is institutional discrimination against Catholics. These theologically supported attitudes can keep the community divided and, while issuing from the Protestant section of the community, have an impact on all:

> ... anti-Catholicism is part of the ideological apparatus that constructs two mutually exclusive groups with opposed sets of interests and identities, and it forms part of the symbolic myths, rituals and language which reproduce and represent polarized and sectarian experiences and behaviour.[59]

Theology can, therefore, be said to have played its part in the Northern Irish divisions and the churches need to listen carefully to the challenge offered by social psychologists. This invitation is one to alternative modes of witness in which difference is not ignored or played down but dealt with in less divisive, and less destructive, ways. Before consideration of some avenues of reflection which would enable association to take place among those who have traditionally avoided it, it is helpful to affirm the theological challenge to the churches which comes from the discipline of social psychology.

2.6 The theological challenge of social psychology to the churches

Anti-Catholicism has already been shown to play its part in the resisting of communication between denominations in Northern Ireland. While those holding anti-Catholic views may make up a small percentage of the population, Bruce notes the importance of such views in the pervasive influence they exert, for,

> [r]eligious ideas and images influence the ways people think and feel; they can structure relationships between groups. Religions readily become involved in social conflict because they help people make sense of their circumstances and they help justify them.[60]

In their study of both urban and rural communities, Buckley and Kenney cite the lack of intermarriage as one of the most significant factors in maintaining divisions in Northern Ireland. The persistence of this endogamy is attributed by them in no small way to the Roman Catholic Church. Their explanation of its impact is worth quoting at length:

> The importance of this endogamy rule on Northern Irish society can scarcely be overestimated. For the individual, the effect is that all his kin, his spouse's kin,

> his children, grandchildren, parents, and grandparents; the brothers and sisters of all these people; and the spouses and in-laws of all *these* people are likely to belong to the same major segment of society as the person himself. And while there is some space to negotiate ethnic identity in Ulster, it is the rule of endogamy that makes this space so confined.[61]

To the endogamy rule and its implications for the lack of social contact, others will want to add practices in education,[62] segregated places of leisure and work, different cultural identifications, and experiences of policing and the judicial system. Each of these tells a tale of a divided community. In light of these practices of segregation the challenge to the churches to move towards a dynamic of breaking down and overcoming division, is clear, for, '[r]eligious identity has a special place in Northern Irish life, not least because of its link to ethnic identity.'[63] However, the challenge to the churches should not be underestimated, nor the genuine concerns about communication as ecumenical activity which undermines truth, derided. Morrow, Eyben and Wilson point to the authentic difficulties which some have:

> The ecumenical movement's espousal of the goal of full Christian unity is a serious obstacle for groups whose identity is established as the protection of truth from erosion or compromise.[64]

This obstacle is certain for those who understand themselves to be chosen and in some way to have a greater sense of the truth than others. It is an exclusivist view but, as Jeremy Cott has shown in his reflections on the doctrine of election, even a sense of chosenness need not obscure or obstruct relationships with others which may be defined as dialogical.

2.7 Exclusivism, chosenness and the challenge to relationships

Jeremy Cott[65] addresses exclusivism and openness in relation to the doctrine of election. A self-understanding rooted in chosenness becomes exclusive when God is limited to one group who provide the one place where God is to be found. It is a notion that springs from the feeling that there is scarcity[66] in how God deals with humanity:

> The problem of election is the problem of scarcity, the sense that there is not enough to go around. The people who regard themselves as elect tend to make their particular identity an exclusive identity – salvation only on their terms.[67]

When combined, scarcity and chosenness may lead to the kind of arrogance and triumphalism that can take the elect in search of a security which actually ignores God's providential care for all, including outsiders. It is security built on exclusion.

Despite the Israelites sense of themselves as being chosen, the Hebrew Scriptures give outsiders and strangers a particular place. Deuteronomy 26 provides the record of a liturgy for the presentation of first fruits.[68] On bringing their gift to the altar the Israelites were to recall their time in Egypt as aliens and strangers and recall also that God heard their cry for help.

In Exodus 22 God gives instruction to the people not to oppress the aliens among them for they know what it is like to live as aliens - indeed oppressing aliens was to carry a heavy penalty.[69] As God heard the cry of the chosen people while they were in exile so God hears the cry of the stranger among the chosen people. It helps the chosen ones, in their relationship with the stranger among them, to remember that they too were strangers, living in the land of Egypt. Bonds of common experience affirm a common humanity between those who are

elect and those who are not. Bonds of common humanity resist the tendency of one group to dominate another by shifting the focus away from exclusivism and towards inclusion.

The hermeneutical keys of 'common humanity' and 'God among strangers' provide the Church with a new understanding of itself that retains a sense of being chosen, but resists the temptation to exclusivism and domination. Democracies are intended to operate on this very principle of shared humanity and common bond as a means of organizing societies:

> In democracies legitimate government is based on the consent of a whole people who acknowledge their common bond together. Behind this consent however lies a deeper and often unstated acknowledgement and acceptance that despite our differences we belong together.[70]

In democratic societies common humanity posits a critique to domination. Likewise, denominational arrogance in the churches is critiqued by a sense of common humanity. The doctrine of election, as affirming chosenness and belonging, is not in itself to be condemned. But the exclusiveness that it may evoke is a failure to acknowledge that all creatures are made and sustained by God. It can also lead to a tendency to domesticate God, whereas God cannot be restrained or contained.

So a sense of chosenness, of being elect, need not preclude a dialogical model for relating to other denominations. In understanding God to be found in all creation the Church is, in fact, urged towards and called to a dialogical model. If Christ is to be encountered in fullness, engaging with those of difference, among whom God already lives, is essential.

Those opposed to ecumenical activity are concerned about unity and what it will mean for truth. If, however, the very notion of unity can be problematized and shown to be

contested within the ecumenical movement itself, then space may be created for those who are currently excluded from social contact. If hostility and division are to be overcome with the assistance of a united witness from the churches then this possibility has to be explored and so it is to the WCC and its evolving understanding of unity that we now turn. This idea of unity is examined with the intention of discovering more clearly the truth about God who invites us to follow him in unswerving loyalty, exhibiting that loyalty in ethical living. The truth, which those who oppose ecumenical activity miss, is precisely what is sought through ecumenical activity. But this is only possible when unity can be shown to be a more complex, subtle and contested notion than those who fear assimilation and domination normally allow.

3. Striving for unity: the dream caught in the web of difference

3.1 The desire for unity

The first Assembly of the WCC met in Amsterdam, 1948, in the wake of two world wars and the horrors of the Shoah. Those meeting at Amsterdam could not escape awareness of the world into which the Church is called to bear witness. The response of the Assembly was one of covenantal commitment to one another:

The World Council of Churches, meeting at Amsterdam, sends this message of greeting to all who are in Christ and to all who are willing to hear.

> … We are one in acknowledging Him as God and Saviour. We are divided from one another not only in matters of faith, order and tradition, but also by pride of nation, class and race. But Christ has made us His own, and He is not divided. In seeking Him we find one another. Here at Amsterdam we have committed ourselves afresh to Him, and have covenanted with one

another in constituting the World Council of Churches. We intend to stay together.[71]

Kathleen Bliss's words, at the Amsterdam Assembly, recognise the call to unity despite division across the many experiences of life. For the churches, commitment to one another was intended to bring correction, for without mutual correction, 'the world has often heard from us not the Word of God but the words of men.'[72] The stakes are high. Divided witness is costly.

Loyalty to God, while providing a sense of belonging for the community of faith, was also understood to challenge church structures and members to consider how to live this loyalty visibly, above all other loyalties.[73] In other words, the relationships of the churches to one another, affect how they speak to and persuade the world that following God is a better way. At its foundation, the WCC did not pretend there were not differences yet the member churches pledged their willingness to stay together. How they could stay together and accommodate and acknowledge their differences was a matter for discussion and emerged in a continuing conversation about models of unity in which difference could be taken seriously. Unity became a contested yet shaping idea in the history of the WCC.

3.2 The question of difference

A glance at the emerging, and sometimes conflicting, models of unity that have pertained throughout the history of the WCC indicates that staying together is not always easy, for unity is open to contending interpretations. What visible unity looks like structurally has been discussed since 1948 and there have been shifts and changes. Change is not the issue here. What is at issue is the direction and dialogue in which those

shifts have been made towards accommodating diversity, as well as evidencing the difficulties in bringing visible unity about.

Up until 1968, diversity was viewed as something to be overcome for the sake of unity but after 1968 there was a shift in thinking, largely owing to the experience of plurality associated with the involvement of more churches from different cultural settings. Yet even before 1968 there were hints that diversity was not to be crushed. In 1958 Suzanne de Diétrich, a founding staff member of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, recalled scripture in recognition of the validity of diversity:

> Again, the life of the body implies diversity in unity. This is Paul's dominant thought in both Rom., ch, 12, and 1 Cor., chs. 12 to 14. There are many gifts and corresponding functions. God is the giver. Therefore, no one can pride himself on his gifts nor disregard the gifts of others. And fullness of life is attained only when all members of the body are healthy and contribute to the life of the whole.[74]

Legitimate diversity, within the framework of unity, remains a matter for discussion, as indicated still later, at the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order held in 1993 in Santiago de Compostela, and continues to challenge the WCC:

> ... diversity can obscure or threaten the church's koinonia in faith. On the one hand, some diverse expressions may appear to be irreconcilable without actually being so. On the other hand, some attempts to express the apostolic faith prove to be inconsistent with 'the truth of the Gospel' (Gal. 2:5-14). An important aspect of maturing into 'the unity of the faith' (Eph. 4:13) is the complex process of discernment by which legitimate diversities are reconciled and illegitimate expressions rejected.[75]

United witness that takes account of diversity is the challenge to the churches seeking to witness effectively in a

divided world. To be committed to the unity of the Church is not to be committed to the notion of one true Church to which all must return,[76] but neither domination nor assimilation were on the agenda as shown in the statement of the WCC's Central Committee at Toronto in 1950, responding to questions about visible unity raised in Amsterdam:

> *The member churches recognize that the membership of the Church of Christ is more inclusive than the membership of their own church body.* ... All the Christian churches, including the Church of Rome, hold that there is no complete identity between the membership of the Church Universal and the membership of their own church.[77]

The five disclaimers[78] contained in the Toronto Statement delimited the authority of the WCC, thereby assuring members of particularity, diversity and autonomy. It was not only, in my opinion, a means to assist churches of difference to come together into the WCC but was also expression of the statement of belief that no one church or group could be identified with the one true Church. Thus it became important for the WCC to make efforts to define what unity means; those efforts reveal the notion of unity to be more than a fixed idea and suggest that it may be described as a 'contested' idea.

3.3 Unity as a contested idea

Aware that to different churches unity has meant different things,[79] the WCC made its first definition of the 'unity' of the Church at New Delhi, 1961, where an organic unity of the churches was envisioned:

> *We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all who in each place are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life*

> *reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.* [80]

The strong emphasis on universality was further developed at Uppsala in 1968, and was complemented at Nairobi where the experience of the universal was emphasised as taking place locally. At the Nairobi Assembly, 1975, this unity was again defined, in terms taken from the Faith and Order meeting at Salamanca, 1973, as, 'a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united.'[81] Nairobi, as earlier in Uppsala, emphasised 'catholicity' thereby stressing diversity and the richness that it brings. Some felt that Nairobi made a move away from organic unity. It was, rather, a move to explain *how* organic unity could work and take account of diversity.[82] Nairobi gave recognition to the universal as experienced locally and thus drew attention to unity not only as an aspiration but also as an experience.

Alongside this vision of organic unity in conciliar fellowship, and with the greater ecumenical involvement of the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II,[83] the idea of unity in reconciled diversity began to take root. The statement of the Lutheran World Federation at their Seventh World Assembly, 1984, is often taken to be a definitive statement of unity in reconciled diversity.[84] It addressed fears of losing particularity by seeking a model that would hold difference together on the basis of common commitment to Christ.

The debate on unity in reconciled diversity raises questions as to whether or not confessional and recognised diversity has a place in future unity. For the Church of South India the commitment was to the death of these confessional identities in order that a new identity could be sought and formed. The Uniting Church in Australia indicates by its very

name that unity is a journey, for the nature of the Church is a pilgrim nature, encompassing the eschatological horizons of the Kingdom which is both 'here' and 'not yet'.

Contemporary discussion on models for unity has turned in the direction of *koinonia.* [85] *Koinonia*, always open to discussion, came to the fore particularly at Canberra and remains pivotal in explicating the unity of the Church. *Koinonia*, translated from the Greek as 'fellowship' or 'communion', focuses on the quality of relationship rather than on structure or form. It offers a dynamic approach, noting that unity grows and develops and is not made by formal structures. Nevertheless, formal structures need to sustain and express unity and provide a framework through which unity may be expressed. [86] The framework will, necessarily, be one in which communion, or *koinonia*, between the churches can be accomplished. The Canberra Assembly, 1991, taking *koinonia* as its theme, acknowledged that a degree of communion already exists, but churches are called to fuller communion.[87] Canberra recognised both the scandal of division and the limits to diversity.[88] Expressing limits to diversity prevents unity at any price, even in the cause of mission to the world, and thus takes account of the concerns of denominations to maintain their boundaries. However, in recognising the scandal of division Canberra also invited the churches to open up their interpretive space.

While no one view of unity has been taken by the WCC as that to which all should adhere, the changes in emphases at the level of the WCC Assembly debates acknowledge, in my view, the difficulties in making real Kathleen Bliss's inspiring words in 1948.[89] The concern to retain legitimate diversity has made visible unity a challenging task. It has also grounded moves towards unity in the reality of how denominations view themselves. The complexities of the notion of unity, and its contested nature, should lessen the fear of assimilation and

domination, for even those openly committed to visible unity continue to debate what unity means for those who are different from one another yet bound together in pre-eminent loyalty to God rather than denominations. At the same time, the impetus towards unity is understood by some to have been lost. A closer examination of the changes in dialogical method within the WCC indicates that it has not been lost but rather that the means of achieving unity has become recognised as being as complex a matter as unity itself. This complexity in dialogical method is seen in the gradual movement from a comparative to a consensus model for dialogue.

3.4 From comparison to consensus within the WCC

The belief that ecumenical relationships, despite written statements of bilateral and multilateral consensus,[90] are in crisis, because churches seem no closer together than ever, can be challenged by a consideration of the developing models used for dialogue within the WCC. These developments add positive dimensions to the story of the journey towards unity.[91]

At the beginning of the modern-day ecumenical movement, the model used for discussion with people of difference was a comparative one. Different traditions presented their viewpoint in the hope that others would understand. It is debatable whether or not this comparative approach can be called dialogue at all, but it did move denominations from isolation to a posture of listening to one another. Following the Lund Conference in 1952, a new approach was sought, an approach beyond the comparative one. According to the Lund Principle, developed at *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order*, 1952, there was commitment to doing theology together, posited in the rhetorical question:

> Should not our churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into

> conversation with other churches and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?[92]

This was to affect the Faith and Order process, working on issues such as church polity, worship, ministry and ecclesiology. For example, at its Montreal world conference in 1963 Faith and Order took up the contested issue of scripture and tradition, and achieved a new level of reconciliation of positions. In light of the Lund Principle, ongoing dialogues and discussions led to the Lima Document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM 1982) in which complementarity is recognized and the enrichment that comes from learning from other traditions. BEM showed a movement from a comparative approach to one of complementarity:

> In leaving behind the hostilities of the past, the churches have begun to discover many promising convergences in their shared convictions and perspectives.[93]

While shifts and changes on the ten-fold[94] developmental spectrum of approaches to dialogue, both bilateral and multilateral, can be noted, different denominations and traditions find themselves at different points on the spectrum and using different approaches at different times. What it is important to note here, is that there have been positive changes in approaches to difference. These changes, taken alongside the discussion on models of unity, express unity as a lived reality, as well as being that to which churches aspire. The churches are, therefore, called to find ways to visibly express the reality of unity, while at the same time maintaining their own boundaries of difference which are appraised by their relationships with others.

The changes in dialogical method indicate a continuing struggle to find ways of living with difference, difference that is

made less significant by overarching allegiance to God. The moves in dialogical method are an encouragement to continue, for they imply that there are new possibilities ahead. A divided Church in a divided world is no better, and no worse, than a poor reflection of humanity in its divisiveness and its implied affirmation that 'we' have got it right, even if 'they' have got it wrong.

The tensions about what unity means remain. Making loyalty to God above all other loyalties visible across ecclesial life is an exercise fraught with dilemma and poignant with hope.[95] It is my belief that the desire and the will to live in loyalty to God calls the churches to painful and joyful interaction with one another, which in itself bears witness, in a divided world, to a unity despite difference. This interaction, which is neither selling out nor compromise, is, rather, a lived expression of the belief that God calls the Church to live with a new loyalty in mind.[96] This paramount loyalty invites the churches to apply a hermeneutic of inclusion which counters the dynamics of exclusivism. The dynamics of exclusivism, and their consequent impact, challenge the churches to be attentive to those outside their own boundary as well as those inside the boundary whose visibility and freedom to move within the interpretive space may be constrained.

3.5 Implications for the churches

Unity, which accepts limited diversity, while internally binding groups together, has at the same time restricted denominations from moving towards those not drawn within the boundary of their own group. Identities have been formed by excluding others. To express unity in reconciled diversity within a tradition will mean change. *The Westminster Confession* is eerily silent on how to relate to other traditions. Implications can be drawn from its comments on marriage avowing that:

> ... such as profess the true reformed religion should not marry with infidels, Papists, or other idolators: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies.[97]

Yet, despite what *The Westminster Confession* states, there are many Irish Presbyterians who are married to Christians of other traditions. Some have been married at ceremonies presided over by Presbyterian ministers and Roman Catholic priests. It would seem that *The Westminster Confession* fails to adequately express the diversity that exists within the tradition, yet the denomination, confronted by contextual circumstances, accommodates diversity sometimes by permitting the exercise of personal judgement but at other times by providing guidelines, agreed by the General Assembly, which the whole church is invited to follow.

It is evidence that the mode of defining oneself by pointing to difference with others, does not adequately reflect internal denominational diversity. By ignoring internal diversities denominations have made differences with one another more defining than core loyalty to God. In so doing denominations may have resisted ongoing conversion to God, a matter to which we now turn.

4. Conversion to God: living unity in difference

4.1 Theological discourse on denominations and conversion

Alan Falconer frames the question for denominations, 'How do we move beyond the recognition of consensus to the living in a consensual manner?'[98] His answer is that the ecumenical journey of dialogue requires conversion which, 'invites us to live in the context of a new horizon in which the other's perceptions are incorporated'.[99]

Using Beverly Gaventa's three categories of personal change,[100] Falconer opts for the 'transformation' model of conversion in which no rejection of the past is required. What is essential is a new perception of the past, leading to mutual response and commitment. In this model of conversion, change comes about through seeking out and taking account of the perspectives of others.

The effect of denominations committed to conversion, in Gaventa and Falconer's[101] understanding, would be to make the Church more inclusive, more able to recognise internal diversity and willing to acknowledge the value of learning from other traditions. It would be a commitment of different denominations and traditions to one another as expression of their readiness to be converted to God; *ecclesia semper reformanda.*

Krister Stendahl's study of Paul is helpful here in illuminating the understanding of conversion as transformation, and rooted in the dynamic of calling and of mission. In the Western, and particularly in the Evangelical tradition, there has been a strong emphasis on Paul's conversion experience. The tendency has been to separate the event of his conversion from the result, which was his faith. Stendahl therefore argues that conversion cannot be known apart from call. While the Damascus Road events (Acts 9 vv9-19) are life-changing for Paul, Stendahl notes that there is no change of religion for Paul, but continuities with Judaism:

> Serving the one and the same God, Paul receives a new and special calling in God's service. God's Messiah asks him as a Jew to bring God's message to the Gentiles.[102]

In the Galatian account of his conversion (1 vv11-17) Paul describes his mission as one which God had for him since before his birth. Paul is here pointing to his work as 'call' which began for him with the Damascus Road events, but which long

before had been planned by God. Paul had, of course, still to work out what the received 'call' would mean, and Ananias was to assist him. Conversion was a matter of working out his call, and therefore a matter of transformation.

Conversion to God inevitably involves a process of change. As an essential dynamic in conversion to God, denominations are called to turn towards one another in humility, willing to learn and ready to share their own gifts and insights. Without engagement in the process of transformation or conversion, denominations can damage one another and their witness to God who transcends denominational and all other boundaries. This understanding of conversion has implications for all denominations, not least PCI. While, for some members of PCI, relationships with those of other traditions are problematic (given concerns that such relationships could lead towards unwanted unity or unnecessary compromise) there is inherent a clear challenge to engage with other denominations seeking conversion to Jesus Christ.

4.2 Implications for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland

The Westminster Confession provides an example, from the Reformed tradition, of how one denomination can cause hurt to another:

> There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ: nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head therof; but is that antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God.[103]

The implication that Pope and antichrist are synonymous has damaged interchurch relations and misrepresented the broad spectrum of opinions that exist inside the PCI. At the same time, the strong conviction that the Pope, as indeed any individual or group that seeks to usurp Christ's

position, could be anti-Christ has to be acknowledged. The warning to any who seek Christ's central position should not be lost. However, the specific difficulty in the implication that the Pope is, rather than has the potential to be, anti-Christ is clear. Some within PCI believe the office of the Pope to have great potential to provide an anti-Christ. The denomination was challenged to find a way to accommodate different viewpoints and at the 1988 General Assembly signs of conversion to enable accommodation were seen. To change *The Westminster Confession* would require an Act of Parliament and was likely to be a step too far and too soon. Consequently, the General Assembly agreed that,

> [i]n exercising the right to interpret and explain her standards the church may set forth her understanding of disputed passages. Chapter 25 paragraph 6 of the Westminster Confession of Faith steadfastly proclaims the Lord Jesus Christ as the only King and Head of the church. From this follows that no mere man can be head thereof, and that any claim to such headship is unbiblical. The General Assembly, under God, reaffirm this historical interpretation of the Pope of Rome as the personal and literal fulfillment of the biblical figure of 'the Anti-Christ' and 'the Man of Sin' is not manifestly evident from Scripture. A variety of views has long been held on this topic consistent with a loyal regard for the authority of Holy Scripture and a genuine acceptance of Reformation standards.[104]

The implication of overarching allegiance to God for denominational allegiance is that churches will have to take account of how their particular way of expressing or defining their identity may have caused hurt to other members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Signs of conversion, such as that cited above, are evidence that a denomination is willing not only to call disciples, but also to live in discipleship, renegotiating all loyalties, but subject always to their transcending loyalty to God.

The Church has to learn and to express, by whatever means it can, how to *BE* disciples in lifestyle and witness as well as seeking to make disciples of others.[105] This means taking account of how statements of belief, sometimes put in language much stronger than the commitment behind them, affect the sense of identity which others have. It is a matter of obedience to Christ and takes courage, as recognised in the ecclesiology and ethics process referred to in section 1.3. Seeking unity is not cheap, but costly in terms of the relationship that the Church has within its own community. The churches have to turn themselves towards a kind of living that speaks to a world that is divided across State, nation and ethnic grouping. There are divisions between North and South, East and West, between women and men, between young and old. If the Church itself lives in contented division it offers little that is compelling to a divided world. The Church is called to live as a different kind of community. This different kind of community is one that is prepared to change. This was articulated in a way that is self-critical in *Unitatis Redintegratio, Decree on Ecumenism*:

> There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion. For it is from newness of attitudes of mind, from self-denial and unstinted love, that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way.[106]

The choice before the churches, therefore, is one of costly living which, it will be argued, is the way of effectively witnessing to the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

4.3 Choosing costly living

Difficulties in apprehending an authentic meaning of unity, without radical loss of identity and integrity, may have disinclined some from the task of pursuing unity.[107] Others

remain firm in the conviction that it is not unity which is at issue but how that unity is lived. *Koinonia* as a model for unity and for churches in relationship with one another, is offered as a way of living and understanding visible unity. *Koinonia*, and the resultant effective, dynamic witness of the Church, comes as churches reflect together and act together in more than contented coexistence. This is what may be called a *koinonia ethic.* The choice to live in conversion to God, taking account of other Christian traditions and thereby witnessing that God's claim is sovereign, is the choice to live a *koinonia* ethic.

Costly Commitment poses a radical challenge when it asserts that, '[t]he divisions among the churches reveal the brokenness of their koinonia and hamper their prophetic mission and service in the world.'[108] Ineffective mission and service in the world, compounded by divided churches, invite the churches to consider whether or not they are falling short of a *koinonia* ethic. A view of community from Latin America helps to explain what is meant by a *koinonia* ethic.[109]

Míguez, the Latin American Reformed theologian, uses motifs of love and solidarity to explicate how a new, more encompassing identity, can be created. While the context of Western Europe is different from that of Latin America, Míguez's motifs speak to me of the *koinonia* ethic that is called for within and between denominations, in whichever continent. The *koinonia* ethic builds the churches' loyalty to God as the awning under which even denominational loyalty must exist. It is an ethic which can give prophetic edge to Church life for it is a different way of forming community and this different way is one which models a life of solidarity and love even when there is little agreement at the level of reasonably expressed doctrines, or weak structural underpinnings. It is an ethic of respect, of openness to learning and of humility.

The Faith and Politics Group tease out what a *koinonia* ethic would mean for denominations in Northern Ireland. They attempt to apply the *koinonia* ethic in a particular context, as is the task of the church in every place:

> Differences will remain between our Churches which are deeply rooted and important but what is vital for Christian credibility is that enmity and fear are taken out of these differences, and that they are contained in a relationship of love and respect.[110]

This *koinonia* ethic offers an alternative to the exclusion that marks the world today, exclusion described by Genevieve Jacques as, 'the fundamental social challenge of our time.' [111]

Failed *Koinonia*, a community deprived of love and solidarity but marked by angry dispute and vicious rejection of others, affects the witness of the Church, and falls short of loyalty to God in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Exclusion, as the fundamental challenge of our times, is a challenge to the churches to move away from forming themselves by definition of what they are not. The dream of unity need not be caught in a web of hostile differences but may be sustained and nourished by a web of diversely constructed relationships, as the history of the WCC has shown to be possible. There is no doubt that such a vision can evoke fear in some hearts, fear that has to be addressed.

4.4 Dealing with the fear of change

Fear of change hinders good relationships between the denominations. Fear holds denominations back from one another and has to be acknowledged and addressed if interchurch relationships are to be more than superficial. It is also the case that superficial relationships may delude the world into thinking that the Church is different and that genuine relationship exists when in fact below the surface many

difficulties are held back from the encounter, thereby undermining its significance.

Faith and Order, aware of the fear of change, uses the idea of *kenosis*, or self-emptying, as a facet of *koinonia*, to suggest how fear might be dealt with.[112] The idea is taken from Philippians 2vv5-8:

> Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
> who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God
> as something to be exploited,
> but emptied himself,
> taking the form of a slave,
> being born in human likeness.
> And being found in human form,
> he humbled himself
> and became obedient to the point of death –
> even death on a cross.

As Christ emptied himself of[113] all that could have been used for personal advantage,[114] so churches seeking *koinonia* will have to be prepared to empty themselves, giving up any use of their entitlement or heritage for personal gain, together with triumphalism or self-aggrandizement. It is within this context that the churches must turn to one another. As always within the WCC a key motivation for this turning to one another, which arises from conversion to God, is ' that the world may believe.' [115] 'That the world may believe' remains the pre-eminent reason for the existence of the ecumenical movement. Robin Boyd, coming from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and now a minister and theologian in the Uniting Church of Australia, argues that the ecumenical movement is suffering from a myopia, which focuses the movement more on unity than on mission. Boyd calls the ecumenical movement back to its commitment to unity that the world may believe:

> Unity is essential, but it is penultimate: the ultimate goal is the world's acceptance of the good news of Christ's kingdom. [116]

Without companionship with one another, sustenance for a journey of witness and service is meagre. Conversion to God, through encounter with one another, affects the witness of the Church and also sustains the Church in a multi-experiential world. It provides the milieu for the focussing of hearts and minds on a loyalty that transcends even denominationalism so that the Church may, 'become the sign and sacrament of the community that God intends the world and the whole creation to manifest.[117]

In *kenosis*, as an essential category within and means to *koinonia*, churches are called to re-examine their commitments. If those commitments are held to because of fear, and not because of loyalty to God above all other loyalties, then they subvert the reality of unity. If, however, churches firmly hold the vision of fullness and universality then the prospect of conversion to one another becomes integral to conversion to God.

5. Conclusion: a *koinonia* ethic for inclusive denominational relationships.

The Church's desire to bear distinctive and effective witness does not, therefore, require churches to overlook their differences. It does require churches to approach unity as a lived reality. There is always something to be learned from other denominational traditions, about the God towards whom the Church seeks to be converted. The web of difference, which can destroy, can become the web that sustains not only the dream but also the lived reality of unity in diversity. Identity formed in loyalty to God above all other loyalties, challenges the churches

to live denominational belonging in a new and more open way, so that the world may believe.

This new way of living denominational differences in relationship with others resists any attempt to institutionalize difference or to underpin separatism with theology. The *koinonia* ethic enables expressions of love and solidarity with those who are different and finds its support in the biblical notion of *kenosis* and in the biblical hermeneutic of inclusion. Later, as trust is established and fear lessened, institutional expressions of the unity already bestowed or attained will have to be affirmed as a necessary part of common witness. The churches' over-focusing on *koinonia* ecclesiology does run the risk of their avoiding such hard structural implications, implications that will have to be addressed in what has the potential to be the greatest *kenosis* for them. Denominations dominated by a hermeneutic of exclusion are invited to pay attention to other biblical threads as a commitment to *sola scriptura* and *ecclesia semper reformanda.* Fears that ecumenism, understood as the drive towards unity between the churches, is all about compromise are addressed when unity is understood to be a variegated and contested, but also dialogical, idea. Thus relationships with others become a real possibility in the commitment to live in primary loyalty to God.

The themes of this thesis so far have attempted to put in place steps on the way to building an ethic for the churches to enable them to engage in their society, particularly where that society is divided and conflicted. The importance of being rooted has been affirmed, diachronically in the tradition of denominations and the wider Church tradition. Synchronic rootedness has also been affirmed as a challenge to the churches to make their witness in the world relevant, culturally situated and pastorally effective. Concerns that this will mean a compromise on the purity of the Church have been addressed through the affirmation that the churches are hermeneutical

communities, and called to understand themselves as such. For hermeneutical communities the central focus is on a transcendent God who invites a loyalty above all others. The churches, as hermeneutical communities have, therefore, to explicate that loyalty in situations where political ideologies and ethnically competing groups may seek to draw the churches in to support their position. Conversion has been affirmed as a central idea for the churches as they seek to explicate loyalty. The idea of conversion has implications for the churches which are denominationally boundaried by Confessions of Faith, Standards of Belief and other agreed documentation.

The challenge is specifically one of maintaining a rooted integrity while finding ways in which to move in and out of their interpretive space. This movement is a matter of deeper conversion to God, enabling denominationally-bound churches to open up interpretive space in which to question themselves and to learn from and with others. In South Africa, for example, various strands of Calvinism were brought into dialogical encounter with one another as the churches sought transformation in the context of apartheid.[118] The focus of the next chapter is to develop an ethic based in rootedness, hermeneutical awareness and openness to others which may be defined as an ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Before turning to that task the themes of this chapter are brought into conversation with the dynamics of unity and separation within Irish Presbyterianism, at another crucial period of its history.

[1] Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics: A Practical and Prophetic Vision for Change* (London: HarperCollins, 1994) pxi.
[2] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) p1.
[3] The Lutheran Archbishop of Sweden, Nathan Söderblom, a driving force behind Life and Work and recipient of the Nobel prize for peace, addressed the First World Conference on Life and Work, Stockholm, 1925: 'The Church listens too much to men, too little to God. Let no one imagine that he hears the voice of God better because he turns a deaf ear to what is said and heard in his own day. Woe unto you, says Jesus, because you do not learn from the signs of the times.' G. K. A. Bell ed., *The Stockholm Conference 1925: Official Report* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926) pp741-745. As cited in Michael Kinnamon & Brian Cope eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998) p15.
[4] 'Samuel Hutchinson, Moderator Presbyterian Church in Ireland 1997/8' in, Michael Hurley SJ, *Christian Unity: an ecumenical second spring?* (Dublin:Veritas Publications, 1998) pxiiif
[5] 'Unitatis Redintegratio', paragraph 1, Austin Flannery O.P. ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1995) p499.
[6] *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1979) Chapter 25, Paragraph 4
[7] Church in this broad sense is taken to mean the people of God in every generation. It incorporates those who have gone before, those who yet will be and those who make up the visible church of today. This church exists by the grace of God and with Christ as the head. Despite this underlying unity the Church has formed itself into denominations and groups all claiming to be part of and identifying with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.
[8] William Temple was prominent in the early development of both the Life and Work and Faith and Order Movements, the International Mission Council and early plans for the WCC. Leonard Hodgson ed., *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order* (London: SCM Press, 1938) pp20f.
[9] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1996) p74.
[10] Writing of the situation in Yugoslavia in the years 1991-1995 Volf interprets this mind-set:
'Ethnic otherness is filth that must be washed away from the ethnic body, pollution that threatens the ecology of the ethnic space.' Ibid. p57.
[11] Ibid. p75.
[12] For example, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries infidels were threatened with death but were offered Christian baptism as a means to having their lives saved. If they were willing to accept the imposed assimilation they could retain the gift of life.
[13] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* p75.
[14] For example, in its infancy the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland was a movement for equality but the dominant Unionist majority was only too ready to judge it a front for Republicanism rather than admit that there might have been some justification in the call for civil rights. The Unionist majority at the time would have preferred the tolerated minority to remain silent.
[15] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* p26.
[16] For example, inner cities are abandoned by the wealthy and the two-thirds world by the wealthy West. They are excluded from decision-making and from reflection and the discomfort their very existence might cause is suppressed.

[17] 'Biblical interpretation as theological interpretation is concerned with the divine presence among the people of God in past and present. Feminist biblical interpretation makes explicit that divine truth and revelatory presence are to be found among women, who are the invisible members of the people of God. It makes explicit that the receivers and proclaimers of revelation are not solely men but also women, it thus seeks to interrupt the theological silence and ecclesial invisibility of women so that God's grace and truth may be revealed among us in their fullness.' Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990) p1.

[18] Gabriel Daly O.S.A., *One Church: Two Indispensable Values – Protestant Principle and Catholic Substance* (Dublin: Irish School of Ecumenics, 1998) p4.

[19] Ibid. p5.

[20] John De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991) pxii.

[21] In explicating this overlapping Charles Villa-Vicencio offers a helpful distinction between the church of history and the church of faith. His reflections are born specifically out of the South African situation where, he argues, the linking of ethnic identity and denominational tradition exists because of an over-identification with the church of history. The witness of the church of faith is, therefore, blunted, 'The 'church of faith' and the 'church of history' have never been identical. The former relates to the latter as an ideal intended to draw it forward to what in its better moments it knows it ought to have become. To take refuge, however, in the notion of this ideal church while evading the historical reality of the existing church is a dangerous and irresponsible exercise in religious subterfuge. To face the harsh reality of what it *is* can, in turn, lead to a variety of ecclesial maladies. These range from naïve optimism to spiritual arrogance, theological hypocrisy and ecclesial triumphalism.' Charles Villa-Vicencio is associate Professor and Head of Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa. Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid: A Socio-Theological History of the English-Speaking Churches* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988) p1. Villa-Vicencio is also careful to recognise that the situation is more complex than easy identification of a denominational tradition with a particular ethnic identity. While the Dutch Reformed Church was strong in its support of apartheid, there were many church traditions responding in various degrees of compliance with and critique of the apartheid system. Even within traditions there were differences. Of the Afrikaans Reformed Churches Villa-Vicencio writes, 'In spite of involvement in the rise of Afrikaanerdom and overt support for the apartheid ideology, historical evidence indicates a reluctance on the part of these churches to support the most zealous and militant acts of the Afrikaaner struggle … The Afrikaaner churches saw their primary role to lie in maintaining Afrikaaner unity, providing extensive moral and ideological support for the Afrikaaner cause.' Ibid. p22f. These degrees of identification make the recognition of over-identification difficult for the churches as their experience is much more complex and various than those outside recognise. This is where the church of faith needs to offer clear critique to the church of history, where denominations need to hear from one another and speak to one another lest there is blindness to the realities of how denominations become coterminous with political ideologies and fail to critique them in terms of a transcending loyalty to God.

[22] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Breaking Down the Enmity: Faith & Politics in the Northern Ireland Conflict (*Belfast: Shanway Distributors, 1993) p41.

[12] Ibid. p125.

[24] The report of the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State, 1937, said: 'The modern world, however, has never been wholly without the preaching of the gospel. Dare we ascribe its present plight solely to its willful rejection of the word of life and of the things which belong to its peace? Nay, is not the modern situation God's call to a church which has been content to preach the redeeming word without the costly redeeming deed? Has it taken the trouble to make plain to itself or to the world the meaning if its redeeming word for the daily life of mankind? What reasons has the church given the world to believe that it possesses the secret of true community in him whom it preaches and whom it professes to serve? The life of the church is deeply infected with the very ills from which humanity suffers.' J. H. Oldham ed., *The Oxford Conference: Official Report* (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1937) pp55-63. As cited in Michael Kinnamon & Brian Cope eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998) p268f.

[25] Thomas F. Best & Günther Gassmann eds., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report, Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994) p97.

[26] 'Christian ethical engagement is an expression of our deepest ecclesiological convictions, and our ecclesiology must be informed by our experience of ethical engagement, by our living out of the gospel in the complex situations of the world. For what we do follows from who we understand ourselves to be, and where we understand ourselves to be at home.' Thomas F. best & Martin Robra eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement And the Nature of the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997) pix.

[27] Writing of the years between the Edinburgh Missionary Conference, 1910, and the founding of the WCC in 1948, Kinnamon and Cope note, '... the rediscovery of the church, the whole church, as an essential component of the gospel.' Michael Kinnamon & Brian Cope eds., *The Ecumenical Movement,* p3.

[28] Ulrike Niens, Ed Cairns and Miles Hewstone, 'Contact and Conflict in Northern Ireland,' in, Owen Hargie and David Dickson eds., *Researching the Troubles: Social Science Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2003) p123.

[29] 'Ethno-political conflict is often regarded as identity-based, meaning the individual's identification with ethnic, religious or national groups, which may be promoted by political leadership.' Ibid. p123.

[30] Ibid. p124.

[31] 'In many countries experiencing ethno-political conflict, inter-group contact is reduced to a minimum as social and environmental barriers limit opportunities to meet people from opposing groups.' Ulrike Niens, Ed Cairns and Miles Hewstone, 'Contact and Conflict in Northern Ireland,' in, Owen Hargie and David Dickson eds., *Researching the Troubles,* p126.

[32] Ibid. p125.

[33] The critique of contact hypothesis focuses largely on the complaint that contact alone is insufficient to effect change; it is what happens when contact is made that is critically important. In his attempt to develop a model for cross-community meetings, Derick Wilson points to the necessity of developing dynamics which will move participants from contact to encounter. 'In these meetings people should have the possibility to experience trust and begin to share and understand the relationships which assist and maintain separation, distrust and fear.' Derick Alexander Wilson, *Learning Together For A Change: The Evolution of an Educational Model for Cross-community Meetings between Adults in a Divided Society* (D. Phil, thesis, unpublished, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 1994) p72. In the context of Northern Ireland, Wilson notes the difficulties of this endeavour. 'The work of bringing people from different

traditions together is always vulnerable to the latest atrocity, local conflict or family experience of communal violence.' Ibid. p78

[34] M B Brewer & N Miller eds., *Groups in Contact: the psychology of desegregation* (New York: Academic Press, 1984).

[35] W Stroewe & M Hewstone eds., *European Review of Social Psychology* (Chichester: Wiley, 1993).

[36] These variables include the demographic limitations of age and social class together with degrees of opportunity, inter-group attitudes, the norms of the constructed social identity which may include exclusion, and levels of anxiety which may make the assimilation of information about the other groups difficult. Ulrike Niens, Ed Cairns and Miles Hewstone, 'Contact and Conflict in Northern Ireland,' in, Owen Hargie and David Dickson eds., *Researching the Troubles,* p127f.

[37] Clearly contact hypothesis, despite its challenges, cannot be said to provide all the answers. 'The main limitation of the contact hypothesis is that contact is often not generalised from one member of the out-group to the out-group as a whole.' Ibid. p126. Nevertheless it is a useful framework for defining the challenge to divided churches.

[38] Ibid. p129.

[39] Fiona Bloomer & Peter Weinreich, *'Cross-Community Relations Projects and Interdependent Identities,'* in, Owen Hargie and David Dickson eds., *Researching the Troubles,* Ibid. p160.

[40] 'Relationships between people from different and opposed traditions in a contested society are often characterised by majority-minority feelings, avoidance and caution. Differences are often understood as being what makes the 'other' inferior. When people within a contested society experience relationships which acknowledge that they are all different and accept their own and others' differences, they experience a contrast to this pattern of superiority/inferiority in relationships.' Derick Alexander Wilson, *Learning Together For A Change,* p146f.

[41] John De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology,* pxvi.

[42] The Dutch Reformed Church had a particular emphasis in the Calvinist Confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – Belgic Confession 1516, Heidelberg Catechism 1563, and the ultra-Calvinist Canons of Dort 1619.

[43] John De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology,* p29.

[44] Ibid. p31.

[45] De Gruchy, having explicated the history of Afrikaaner Calvinism and apartheid, is not daunted from the Reformed tradition but has sought ways to reanimate it in a way that can renew South African society, 'While a tradition can wither and die – or worse, become an albatross around our necks – it can also be retrieved as a source of empowerment in the present, providing symbols not only in its own revitalization and renewal, but for society at large.' Ibid. p39. In the South African context is was important to retrieve other strands of Calvinism to stand alongside and challenge Afrikaner Calvinism. Johannes Van der Kemp(1747 – 1811), for example, provided a Reformed perspective which was both evangelical and ecumenical. He understood and explicated his theology from within the experience of the oppressed and struggling and looked for transformation and hope from within that perspective.

[46] Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Geneva: WCC 1985) pix.

[47] Cyrus, King of Persia, allowed the exiled Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple. In this he was appointed by God: 'Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him – and the gates shall not be closed.' Isaiah 45 v1.

[48] Wall murals, for example, in loyalist areas often use texts from the Hebrew Scriptures.

[49] Or, for example, the intolerance found in Hosea of Canaanite fertility gods

[50] John 1 vv16-18: 'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.'

[51] 'You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.' (Colossians 1 vv. 5b-6) 'He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.' (Colossians 1 vv. 17-20).

[52] Hans-Ruedi Weber expresses the tension in the Hebrew Scriptures as that between particularism and universalism, seen in Israel's understanding of itself as called and chosen but at the same time a light to the nations. (Is 49) Hans-Ruedi Weber, 'God's Arithmetic', G. H. Anderson & Thomas Stransky eds., *Evangelization, Mission Trends, no. 2,* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975) p6.

[53] 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.' (John1 vv1-3).

[54] So, in the context of interfaith dialogue, Ariarajah writes: 'There is nothing that is outside God's providence; there is no life, no experience, no worship, no liberation, no salvation that can happen outside the scope of God's love and knowledge.' Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, pxv.

[55] Duncan Morrow, Karin Eyben & Derick Wilson, 'From the margin to the middle: Taking equity, diversity and interdependence seriously,' in, Owen Hargie and David Dickson eds., *Researching the Troubles,* p175.

[56] Gareth I Higgins & John D Brewer 'The roots of sectarianism in Northern Ireland,' Ibid. p110.

[57] In its Covenantal form, anti-Catholicism is based in the Biblical notion of God's chosen people and is expressed as a duty of the Protestant community that espouses it. It is political and religious in nature and permits little in the way of engagement between Protestants and Catholics. 'As reformulated by Scottish Presbyterians and Ulster Scots in the sixteenth century, covenants are as much political contracts as theological ones, for they underwrite a set of social and political arrangements which are seen as God-given and which are said to reflect loyalty to him.' John D Brewer with Gareth I Higgins, *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland, 1600-1998: The Mote and the Beam* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998) p135. In its secular form, anti-Catholicism is political rather than religious. Catholics are equated with a particular political viewpoint and criticized for their politics. Political engagement may, however, occur as a matter of expediency, 'The ideas that form the foundation of the secular mode are support for, and vigorous defence of, the Union with Britain; the claim that the Irish Republic is a degenerate and backward state; that Union is under threat; that the major problems to Union are political and that theology is either irrelevant or secondary to political circumstances.'

Ibid. p151f. In its Pharisaic mode, anti-Catholicism arises from notions of superiority and exclusivity and is concerned to make a distinction between truth and error in order that right doctrine can be preserved. Pharisaic anti-Catholicism, like Covenantal, has a biblical basis but in the New Testament and Jesus Christ. In its Pharisaic mode anti-Catholicism permits contact with Catholics in order to convert them, 'There is a sharp distinction made in the Pharisaic mode between biblical Truth and Error, from which arises a self-confidence that they have a responsibility to share this knowledge with those who lack it by means of conversion attempts.' Ibid. p165. It should be noted that the use of the term 'Pharisaic' here may be offensive to the Jewish community.

[58] Ibid. p2.

[59] Gareth I Higgins & John D Brewer *'The roots of sectarianism in Northern Ireland,'* in Owen Hargie and David Dickson eds., *Researching the Troubles,* p19.

[60] Steve Bruce, *The Edge of the Union: The Ulster Loyalist political vision* (Oxford: University Press, 1994) p26. It is Bruce who estimates that those who espouse anti-Catholic views make up no more that 15% of the population and of them he writes, 'There are in Northern Ireland Protestants who see all history as a struggle between the forces of good and evil, God and the Devil, Christ and the Anti-Christ. They interpret the republican and nationalist causes as part of a continuing campaign by the Roman Catholic Church to undermine those countries and erode those populations which most strongly support the Reformed Protestant faith.' Ibid. p22.

[61] Anthony D Buckley & Mary Catherine Kenney, *Negotiating Identity: Rhetoric, metaphor, and social drama in Northern Ireland* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995) p6.

[62] '... one of the key characteristics of education in Northern Ireland lies in the existence of two parallel religious school systems.' Tony Gallagher, 'Education and Equality in Northern Ireland,' in, Owen Hargie and David Dickson eds., *Researching the Troubles,* p59.

[63] Anthony D Buckley & Mary Catherine Kenney, *Negotiating Identity,* p111.

[64] Duncan Morrow, Karin Eyben & Derick Wilson, 'From the margin to the middle: Taking equity, diversity and interdependence seriously' In Owen Hargie and David Dickson eds., *Researching the Troubles,* p175.

[65] Jeremy Cott is a biblical theologian in the evangelical tradition.

[66] This scarcity can be understood in both material and emotional dimensions. Materially the issue of scarcity in the semi-nomadic days of the patriarchs was dealt with by calling on God to provide new places in which to live. Emotionally, for example, Cain's murder of Abel was evidence of a sense of scarcity, for God did not seem to have enough love for them both: 'And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry and his countenance fell.' (Genesis 4 vv4b-5).

[67] Jeremy Cott, 'The Biblical Problem of Election', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* vol. xxii, pp199-288, Spring 1984 p199.

[68] Deuteronomy 26 vv4-7: 'When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number and there to become a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.'

[69] Exodus 22 v21: 'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.'

[70] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *New Pathways: Developing a Peace Process in Northern Ireland (*Belfast: Faith & Politics Group, 1997) p9.

[71] *Man's Disorder & God's Design: The Amsterdam Assembly Series (1 volume),* (New York: Harper, 1949) unnumbered pages at end of volume.

[72] Ibid.

[73] At the Second International Missionary Council held at Tambaram in 1938, the report summoned the churches: 'Above all it is called to declare the Gospel of the compassion and pardon of God that men may see the Light which is in Christ and surrender themselves to His service. And all this it must do at any cost, in fidelity and gratitude to Him who at so great cost wrought its salvation. But the further summons to the Church is to become in itself the actualization among men of its own message. No one so fully knows the failings, the pettiness, the faithlessness which infect the Church as we who are its members.' *The Authority of the Faith: Report of the International Missionary Council Meeting at Tambaram, Madras. Vol. 1* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939) pp192.

[74] Suzanne de Diétrich, *The Witnessing Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958) pp165-171. As cited in Michael Kinnamon & Brian Cope eds., *The Ecumenical Movement,* p25.

[75] Thomas F. Best & Günther Gassman eds., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia,* p17. The long history of discussion regarding limits to diversity can be traced throughout the history of the WCC. For example, in preparatory material for The Third World Conference on Faith and Order held at Lund, 1952: 'At the same time we recognise the presence of factors which will always limit the visible expression of the unity of the Church. We are agreed that no form of compulsion is compatible with forwarding the work of God.' *The Church: A Report of the Theological Committee of the Faith and Order Committee of the World Council of Churches in preparation for The Third World Conference on Faith and Order to be held at Lund, Sweden in 1952 (*Rochester, Kent: Staples Printers Ltd, 1951) p57.

[76] The idea of unity comes from scripture. In the New Testament leaders and bishops were responsible for mediating disputes and conflicts, for example the dispute between Gentile and Jewish Christian communities dramatized in Acts 15. This concern for unity has remained throughout the history of the church. Both in the eleventh century and at the reformation there were attempts to hold to the unity of the church. Calvin and Luther never intended to break away from the Roman Catholic Church. They sought to remain within a reformed church but they concluded that they had no choice but to break with the past in radical discontinuity with the tradition that had nurtured them. At Vatican I there was clear commitment to an ecumenism which involved the return of those who had split from the one true church. At Vatican II representatives from the Protestant churches were invited to attend the Council. 'The chorus of voices urging that the way to unity should be seen not as a return but rather as a common renewal of all the Churches grew stronger.' Lukas Vischer, 'The Ecumenical Movement and The Roman Catholic Church', Harold E. Fey ed., *The History of the Ecumenical Movement 1948-1968* (Geneva: WCC Publications 1993) p324.

[77] As cited in Michael Kinnamon & Brian Cope eds., *The Ecumenical Movement,* p466.

[78]The Toronto Statement: 1. That the WCC is not and never will be a super church. 2. That the WCC does not exist to negotiate union. 3. That the WCC should not be based on any one idea of church. 4. That the WCC should not prejudice any legal problems between its members. 5. That the WCC should not dictate on the nature of a doctrine for church unity.

[79] Spiritual harmony, the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments and Episcopal structure have all been emphasized as being important in the formation of a united Church. Attempts have been made, for example, to still fears by looking for a *regula fidei*. The Faith and Order Commission have taken up this task. 'The criteriological position with regard to a rule of faith varied from *sola scriptura* (the Scriptures alone), to *testimonium internum Spiritus Sancti* (the inner and personal witness of the Spirit), with all kinds of appeals to forms of *magisterium* (the teaching authority of the church) in between.' Anton Houtepen, 'Hermeneutics, Mission & Ecumenism', *Exchange* vol. 24 (2) 1995, p96.
[80] W. A. Visser't Hooft ed., *The New Delhi Report* (London: SCM, 1962) p116f.
[81] David M. Paton ed., *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi, 1975: Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (London: SPCK, 1976) p258.
[82] 'The term 'conciliar fellowship' has been frequently misunderstood. It does *not* look towards a conception of unity different from that full organic unity sketched in the New Delhi statement, but rather is an elaboration of it. The term is intended to describe an aspect of the life of the one undivided Church *at all levels*.' Ibid. p59ff, para. 4.
[83] Not yet in full membership of the WCC, the Roman Catholic Church expresses its views through participation in the Faith and Order Movement and the Joint Working Group established between the Vatican and WCC Central Committee in 1965. At Vatican II, 'Unitatis Redintegratio' expressed the Roman Catholic position and called for continuing dialogue on the ecumenical journey; 'Although the ecclesial communities separated from us lack the fullness of unity with us which flows from baptism, and although we believe they have not preserved the proper reality of the eucharistic mystery in its fullness, especially because of the absence of the sacraments of Orders, nevertheless when they commemorate the Lord's death and resurrection in the holy supper, they profess that it signifies life in communion with Christ and await his coming in glory. For these reasons, doctrine about the Lord's supper, about the other sacrament, worship, and ministry in the church, should figure among subjects of dialogue.' 'Unitatis Redintegratio', paragraph 22, Austin Flannery O.P. ed., *Vatican Council II,* p520.
[84] 'The true unity of the church, which is the unity of the body of Christ and participates in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is given in and through proclamation of the gospel in Word and sacrament. This unity is expressed as a communion in the common and, at the same time, multiform confession of one and the same apostolic faith. It is a communion in holy baptism and in the eucharistic meal, a communion in which the ministries exercised are recognized by all as expressions of the ministry instituted by Christ and his church. It is a communion where diversities contribute to fullness and are no longer barriers to unity. It is a committed fellowship, able to make common decisions and act in common. ... In recognizing the diversities as expressions of the one apostolic faith and the one catholic church, traditions are changed, antagonisms overcome, and mutual condemnations lifted. The diversities are reconciled and transformed into a legitimate and indispensable multiformity within the one body of Christ.' Lutheran World Federation Report No.19/20, *In Christ – Hope for the World*, Budapest, 1984 (Geneva: LWF, 1985) p175. The notion of *koinonia* has become fundamental within the WCC, particularly since Canberra 1991, in understanding the nature of the Church and its visible unity. The term *koinonia* (communion, participation) is used in the New Testament, patristic and Reformation writings in relation to the Church. Although in later centuries the term remained in use, it is reclaimed today

in the ecumenical movement as a key to understanding the nature and purpose of the church. Due to its richness of meaning, it is also a convenient notion for assessing the degree of communion in various forms already achieved among Christians within the ecumenical movement.' WCC, Faith & Order Paper 18, *The Nature and Purpose of the church: A stage on the way to a common Statement (*Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991) p24.

[86] Jean Skuse, at one time general secretary of the Australian Council of Churches, addressed the National Council of Churches in 1986 and pointed to the reality of structures as needing to reflect and embody what they attempt to frame. 'The challenge for each council is to enable the ecumenical agenda to be at the heart of the churches they serve. It is to discourage them from hiving off into safe, unconnected cells – a sure sign of death and decay – but to be part of the living, pulsing organism of the body of Christ. It is to facilitate the mission of each church within the context of, and enriched by, an ecumenical dimension which is global in vision but grounded in the specific expressions of local, regional and national worship and witness.' Thomas F. Best ed., *Instruments of Unity: National Councils of Churches within the One Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988) p89.

[87] 'The unity of the church to which we are called is a koinonia given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God's grace to all people and serving the whole of creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness. This full communion will be expressed on the local and universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action.' Günther Gassmann & John A. Radano eds., *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Ecumenical Perspectives on the 1991 Canberra Statement on Unity (*Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993) p2.

[88]The Canberra Statement, *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling*, expresses something of what is valid diversity and how to deal with it in the life of the church. 'Diversities that are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic or historical contexts are integral to the nature of communion; yet there are limits to diversity. Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8); salvation and the final destiny of humanity as proclaimed in Holy Scripture and preached by the apostolic community. In communion diversities are brought together in harmony as gifts of the holy Spirit, contributing to the richness and fulness of the Church of God.' Ibid. 2.

[89] Mary Tanner notes an ambiguity in statements in the years since the Canberra Assembly in what 'all the churches' now means. She notes too the emphasis of the Assembly on the exploration of diversity. Mary Tanner, 'Visible Unity in the Work of the World Council of Churches', Thomas Best & Theodore Nottingham eds., *The Vision of Christian Unity: Essays in honour of Paul Crow Jnr.* (Indianapolis: Oikoumene Publications, 1997) p150.

[90] Bi-lateral dialogues have grown in importance since the 1960's. Official bi-laterals have included those between Anglicans and Lutherans, Anglicans and the Orthodox, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, Baptist and Reformed, Lutheran and Roman Catholics, Methodist and Roman Catholics, Old Catholic and Orthodox, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic, and Reformed and Roman Catholic. Important multi-lateral dialogues

have also taken place – Lutheran/Roman and Catholic/ Reformed, on the theology of marriage and mixed marriage and the LIMA document on baptism, eucharist and ministry. The Porvoo Statement, 1992, 'Together In Mission And Ministry' is significant here too. It built on already existing dialogues – between the Nordic and Baltic Anglicans and Lutherans, The Lutheran-Episcopal Agreement, 1982 and The Meissen Statement, 1988, between The Church of England and Evangelical Churches in East and West Germany. It also drew on other joint events, for example the Anglo-Scandinavian theological conferences which began in 1929 and bi-lateral and multi-lateral world level dialogues, for example Pullach, 1973, Lima, 1982, Cold Ash, 1983 and Niagara, 1988. The aim of the conversations at Porvoo between Anglicans and Lutherans was, '... to move forward from our existing piecemeal agreements towards the goal of visible unity. By harvesting the fruits of previous ecumenical dialogues we hoped to express a greater measure of common understanding, and to resolve the longstanding difficulties between us about episcopacy and succession.' *The Porvoo Statement: Together In Mission And Ministry* (London: Church House Publishing, 1993) p2f.

[91] As General Secretary of the WCC, Konrad Raiser addressed the WCC General Assembly at Harare and recognised the crisis which can be perceived within ecumenism: 'We seem at a crossroads. Different understandings of ecumenism are being put forward, and the way ahead is not clearly visible. There is disappointment that the intensive search for visible unity of the church has not yet opened the way to true koinonia.' Diane Kessler ed., *Together On The Way: Official report of the Eighth Assembly of the WCC* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999) p83. Aram I, one of the Moderators at the Assembly, while noting a crisis notes another reality which could equally be the focus of positive moves within ecumenism: 'Institutional ecumenism is in crisis. We are witnessing a remarkable outburst of people's ecumenism in different forms and in different parts of the world.' Ibid. p65.

[92] Oliver S. Tomkins ed., *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Lund 1952* (London: SCM, 1953) p16.

[93] 'Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982' Harding Meyer & Lukas Vischer eds., *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical conversations on a World Level* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1984) p468.

[94] Conflict – Competition – Coexistence – Comparison – Cooperation – Consensus – Complementarity – Commitment – Conversion – Communion. Alan Falconer, Faith and Order Commission, uses this ten-fold spectrum in his contribution to the papers related to the Faith and Order meeting at Moshi, 1996. Alan Falconer ed., *Faith and Order in Moshi: The 1996 Commission Meeting* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998) p46.

[95] There are other issues which bear consideration if there were time and space – issues linked to truth, doctrine, the life of the church, continuity and discontinuity, the scriptural impulse to unity and how that comes into interface with living the truth as we see it, to name only a few.

[96] In this regard one can note the resurgence of work on trinitarian theology and its potential, if used carefully, for grounding ecumenical endeavour in a shared theology. To live with the concern for finding ways to be together, to share difference and yet witness as one, is to bear witness to the God who is in Godself a community of mutuality, equality, communication and unity: 'Indeed, trinitarian theology is par excellence a theology of relationship: God to us, we to God, we to each other. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that the 'essence' of God is relational, other-ward, that God exists as diverse persons united in a community of freedom, love, and knowledge.' Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for us:*

The Trinity and Christian Life (San Francisco: Harper, 1973) p243. To live in loyalty to this God is to live as this God is. For the denominations, the call of such loyalty is to live in relational existence, turned towards others and not unto themselves. It is to seek community perhaps especially in diversity and difference. In *Costly Unity*, one of the three study documents on ecclesiology and ethics produced jointly by the WCC's Unit I (Faith and Order) and Unit III (Justice, Peace and Creation), we read: 'The Trinity is expressed as an image for human community and the basis for social doctrine and ecclesial reality ... the church not only has, but also is, a social ethic, a koinonia ethic.' Thomas F. Best & Martin Robra eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics,* p5.

[97] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 24, Paragraph 3.

[98] Alan Falconer ed., *Faith and Order in Moshi,* p43.

[99] Ibid. p45.

[100] Beverley Gaventa, a member of the plenary commission on Faith and Order, suggests three categories of change: 1. Alteration. This type of conversion is natural progression from what has been to whatever is new. 2. Pendulum. This approach to conversion is based in radical discontinuity. The past is turned away from and a new direction taken. It involves a complete turnabout. 3. Transformation. This is about alteration in the light of both past and present. No rejection of the past is necessary but a new perception leading to mutual response and commitment. In this view of conversion the perspectives of others are influential and taken into account. Beverley Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) pp148f. Ibid. p44f.

[101] Falconer's theme echoes the Groupe des Dombes who call for different confessions to be converted to one another in recognition that the Church needs to acknowledge fullness and universality. 'The defense of confessional identities has caused wounds, as on living tissue, which are not characteristic of the confession itself, still less of Christianity.' The Groupe des Dombes, *For The Conversion of the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1930) p23f *Unitatis Redintegratio* expresses it as the need to, 'become familiar with the outlook of the separated churches and communities.' *Unitatis Redintegratio*, paragraph 9, Austin Flannery O.P. ed., *Vatican Council II,* p510.

[102] Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles: and other essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976) p7.

[103] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 25, Paragraph 6

[104] *Minutes of the General Assembly, 1988* (Belfast: Church House, 1988) p54.

[105] In *Costly Obedience*, the third of the study documents on ecclesiology and ethics produced jointly by the WCC's Unit I (Faith and Order) and Unit III (Justice, Peace and Creation), it is affirmed that the church needs to ask itself 'how it can be a community of relevant moral witnessing for such a world.'
Thomas F. Best & Martin Robra eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics*, p52.

[106] 'Unitatis Redintegratio', paragraph 7, Austin Flannery O.P. ed., *Vatican Council II,* p508.

[107] Denominational allegiance remains for many a clearer sign of the gospel than unity within diversity. While participating for many years in the WCC Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, of the Church of South India, has kept a critical eye on the movements made inside the WCC. As an Evangelical one of his repeated concerns is that the WCC might come to think of itself as the Church. He does not go so far as to affirm denominationalism as all-important but he does persist in warning the WCC: 'The fundamental idea which the Council seeks to embody is 'the conviction that the Lord of the church is God-among-us Who continues to gather His children and to

build His Church Himself.' The question as to what is proper embodiment of that idea is the central ecclesiological question. ... Just because the Council is not the Church it will become some sort of monster unless it continually remembers its purely provisional character.' Lesslie Newbigin, 'Comments on 'The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches' *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1951 pp253f. Denominational allegiance remains strong, even in a world of various cultures, experiences, contexts and traditions where the exchange of diversity can make God, 'credible.' Anton Houtepen, 'Hermeneutics, Mission & Ecumenism' *Exchange* vol. 24 (2) 1995, p101.

[108] Costly Commitment 1994, Thomas F. Best & Martin Robra eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics,* p25.

[109] Jóse Míguez Bonino, the Reformed Latin American liberation theologian and member of the second consultation at Tantur on 'Costly Commitment', writes of the experience of the Latin American base communities. Concerned with evangelization he accepts Gutierrez's distinction between what evangelization is about in Latin America and what it is about in the North Atlantic region. In Latin America it is about helping 'non-persons' to an awareness of God as Father. In the Western world secularized people have to be persuaded to accept God's existence. In the Latin American context Christian communities are called to represent another worldview. He explains how this can be done in a situation of *anomie*: 'Continuity with the old identity is preserved in the world of symbols and gestures deeply rooted in the people's consciousness. But the meaning and operation of these symbols and gestures is radically transformed. The center of this transformation is the experience of the community of mutual love and solidarity.' José Míguez Bonino 'Love and Social Transformation in Liberation Theology' Marc H. Ellis & Otto Maduro eds., *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honour of Gustavo Gutierrez* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989) p123. He sees this love and solidarity lived in his own context in common appropriation of scripture and the church, in sharing everyday joy and sorrow and in helping the community to organize and put programmes into action which will address the problems and needs of the wider Latin American society. In this way individuals working alongside one another in unity create a new identity alongside others. Through unconditional love lived in and by the Christian community the gospel is not only proclaimed but also lived.

[110] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Breaking Down the Enmity,* p41f.

[111] Genevieve Jacques, 'Confronting the Challenge of Exclusion', *The Ecumenical Review* vol. 46(3) July 1994 p328. Jacques sees this exclusion making its mark in a threefold crisis plaguing all societies: a crisis in economics, a crisis in social relationships and a crisis of meaning.

[112] *Kenosis* was taken up at the *Fifth World Conference on Faith & Order*, Santiago de Compostela, 1993. The then Moderator of the Faith & Order Commission, Mary Tanner, said: 'Koinonia draws our attention away from our divisions directing us to the giving and receiving life and love that flow between the persons of the Holy Trinity. This mysterious life of divine communion is one in which the personal and relational are prior; in which multiplicity is perfectly held together so that there is no separation while at the same time the very unity is enriched by the multiplicity, so that it never degenerates into arid uniformity. It is a communion at the heart of which is a cross and it is a communion which is dynamic, always sending and being sent, stretching out to embrace and enfold within its own life.' Mary Tanner, 'Visible Unity in the Work of the World Council

of Churches', in, Thomas Best & Theodore Nottingham eds., *The Vision of Christian Unity,* p24.

[113] The implication is not that Christ gave up his deity but that he gave up any display of that deity. In the same way kenosis for Christian denominations is not a matter of walking away from denominational heritage.

[114] Fritz Reinecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) p550.

[115] Formulated at the WCC inaugural Assembly 1948 and revised at Nairobi 1975 one of the functions and purposes of the WCC is defined, '... to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.' David M. Paton ed., *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi, 1975: Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, p317f.

[116] Robin Boyd, 'Focus of Unity: Ultimate and Penultimate Goals of the Christian Movement', *Scottish Journal of Theology* vol. 50 no. 4 1997. p461.

[117] Alan Falconer ed., *Faith and Order in Moshi,* p52.

[118] See footnote 47 above.

CHAPTER 4 ALLEGIANCE TO GOD

PART II: A conversation with history Irish Presbyterianism and the dynamics of union and separation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

1. Introduction

In the first part of this chapter I considered the issue of denominational relationships, further developing the dialogical model for conversion and transformation in respect of those relationships. The idea of unity was examined in the history of the WCC in the belief that unity, as a variegated and contested idea, need not be something that is resisted. Reflecting on the life and work of the WCC, I argued that, while unity is itself a contested idea, the dynamics of the process of negotiating unity contribute to the Church's conversion. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion were addressed in the exploration of how churches are to live and witness to loyalty to God above all other loyalties.

I concluded that, precisely because there are different models of unity available, denominations can adopt models of relationship which accommodate their concerns, while engaging in dialogue with one another. For the churches, failure to engage with one another on the basis that the search for unity will compromise them is not a sufficient argument for failing to build denominational relationships. This failure is compounded by the context in which churches find themselves in contested societies and gives credence to the belief that the churches have nothing distinctive to offer. What is at stake is the witness of the churches to the Gospel, which stands in critical relationship to conflicted, contested and often violent societies and, hence, the churches' ability to contribute to the transformation of Church and world. Failed relationships, it was argued, between the denominations affect the witness of the Church, while living

unity with respect for difference is an opportunity to maintain the integrity of denominations while moving in and out of the hermeneutical space of others. In this way, churches bear witness to a Gospel which transforms relationships.

In the latter half of the twentieth century the history of Irish Presbyterianism records its withdrawal from the WCC and the Tripartite Consultation, and the decision not to become part of the new ecumenical structures for relationship in Britain and Ireland. The energy for seeking unity, so evident in the 1960s and 1970s, appears to have faded. In section 3, these historical realities will be examined against the backdrop of the dynamic towards union within Irish Presbyterianism, specifically when the General Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod united to form the General Assembly in 1840. This historical conversation is an investigation into the possibilities of openness from a more hermeneutically aware position. A hermeneutic of retrieval is employed to examine the formation of the General Assembly in 1840 and to investigate the dynamics of separation in the twentieth century, in the hope of discovering that the impulse towards unity has been maintained, albeit in less explicit and more complex forms. The conversation will challenge those who stand in the Reformed tradition and understand it as espousing the integrity of separation, criticising the notion of separation with a view of history which takes account not only of the dynamics for separation, but also of the dynamics of openness to others and engagement with them. It will be clear from the conversation that unity is a variegated, contested idea and it will be argued that the very contesting of the idea of unity makes it possible to have dialogue and relationships with other denominations in a way which is authentic and true to denominational self-understanding.

I will begin with an account of the founding of the General Assembly of the PCI which occurred in 1840 and was the union of the Secession Synod[1] and The General Synod of Ulster. I wish to emphasise that Irish Presbyterianism as it is structured today was, therefore, born out of the dynamic towards union. I will then turn to more recent history and examine the position of PCI on inter-church dialogue and relationships, both within the island of Ireland and within the world. These accounts will show that unity is a contested, dialogical notion and that there is a challenge to engage in inter-church relationships.

2. From separation to union in the founding of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland

It will be recalled from Chapter Three, section 4, that with doctrinal matters coming to the fore in the ongoing discussion about church polity, with specific reference to the matter of subscription to *The Westminster Confession*, seventeen non-subscribing ministers withdrew from the General Synod of Ulster and on 25th May 1830 they formed the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster, known today as the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church. This, as we saw, was the culmination of a long debate which had both ecclesiological and theological concerns. As the General Synod of Ulster came nearer to dividing over the issue of subscription, theological matters assumed more significance, specifically regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. By the time separation occurred theological issues were dominating ecclesiological ones. Both ecclesiological and theological concerns, however, were addressed by the Synod when it passed an overture in 1829 requiring subscription to *The Westminster Confession.* Ecclesiologically, the right of church courts to decide on the standards of belief and practice for its members was agreed. Theologically, the doctrines explicated in

The Westminster Confession were affirmed as being the statement of belief for those who subscribed to *The Westminster Confession.* But there were consequences, particularly for relationships with other Presbyterians in Ireland. The Secession Synod of Ulster, which had remained in close relationship with the General Synod of Ulster, was a subscriptionist denomination. With the split from the Remonstrants, new and closer relationships with the Secession Synod became possible. At the same time, however, the possibility of overcoming the separation from the Remonstrants was weakened. Seaton Reid indicates the very real possibility of an ecclesiastical alliance between the Secession and General Synods which was the result of separation from the Remonstrants:

> By the confirmation of the overture requiring absolute subscription to the Confession of Faith, the principal barrier in the way of another, and a still closer, ecclesiastical alliance was completely removed.[2]

Subscription had not been the only barrier to closer relationship between the General and Secession Synods. These other differences were not kept within the confidence of the Synods but were well known, for,

> [i]nitially, and for more than a generation, Synod of Ulster and Secession ministers were often involved in acrimonious controversy which spilled over into public debates and pamphlet warfare.[3]

Other barriers to considerations of union with the Secession Synod were resolved soon after the matter of subscription. In 1838 disparity in the *regium donum*[4] was settled, putting members of both bodies on an equal footing. There existed common support for the Bible Society, a shared view of oaths and civil courts, an interest in religious revival and mission, advocacy of temperance and opposition to changes in

legislation regarding National Education. Furthermore, students for the ministry of both Synods were educated together in Belfast Academical Institute. These changes meant that union was becoming a real possibility for the Secession and General Synods.[5] With the ever-growing movement towards one another, and the resolution of their differences, the Synods were faced with the challenge of evidencing their relationship in the development of an appropriate, common structure. This was recognised by the students at Belfast Academical Institute who formed a prayer meeting participated in by ministry students under the care of both the Secession and General Synods of Ulster. At that joint prayer meeting discussion began about the possibility of union. The level of discussion among students reflected what was happening within the wider denominations, for ministers and members of both Synods showed a real openness to union. That openness was to result in action within both Synods when it became clear that,

> [p]arties so well disposed for a coalition could not long remain separated. Memorials, expressing a desire for union, from the students of the two denominations, from the elders and people of several congregations throughout Ulster, and from a public meeting, consisting of members of the various churches in Belfast connected with the two bodies, were presented to the Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod, assembled respectively in June and July, 1839.[6]

Each Synod appointed a committee to consider the matter. The committees were given freedom to consult with one another and to call special meetings of Synod when they thought it appropriate. The committees met in August 1839 and prepared the steps that needed to be taken towards union. On April 8th, 1840, special meetings were called of both Synods to finally decide the terms of the union.

The Secession Synod resolved,

> [t]hat a Union be formed between this Synod and the Synod of Ulster, and that a Committee be now appointed to meet a similar Committee of that Synod to arrange the minor details necessary for the perfecting of the Union.[7]

The General Synod of Ulster resolved,

> [t]hat this Synod is deeply grateful to Almighty God, for the prospect of a speedy accomplishment of the important measure of a Union between the two Synods, - that we agree to form this Union, - and that the Committee appointed at last Synod be now re-appointed to meet the Committee of the Seceding Synod, in order to arrange the minor details necessary for perfecting this Union.[8]

The Synods joined for worship on April 10th. The few finer details to be decided were left to the committees and it was agreed that the Synods would meet in July to finally agree the union.

On Tuesday 7th July, 1840, the General Synod of Ulster met at May Street, Belfast, and the Secession Synod at Linenhall Street, Belfast. Both agreed the final terms of the union and on Friday, 10th July, 1840 the final act of corporation was passed. Each left their places of meeting and converged along the way to Rosemary Street, headed by the Moderators of the two Synods who led worship on their arrival at Rosemary Street Church. The Act of Union (see Appendix F, *Act of Union 1840*) was read and agreed and Rev. Dr. Hugh Hanna appointed as Moderator. Dr. Hanna then constituted the court as 'The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.' Representatives of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland were present and they congratulated the new body which then moved immediately to appoint missionaries.[9] In the first part of this chapter, section 4.4., I pointed to the work of Robin Boyd, originally an Irish Presbyterian, whose reminder to

the Church was that unity is for the sake of mission. This initial act of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland was effectively one of achieving union not for its own sake, but for the sake of mission. This prophetic act was coupled with practical steps that needed to be taken to secure the union of the Synods at every level. So, lest the old issue of subscription should again raise its head, a committee was appointed to draft a Code of Discipline which, 'embodied the most stringent law of Subscription to the Westminster Confession.'[10]

Union was achieved between those who had been separated from old friends in the Secession Church. However, the union was at a price. Companions who had already become members of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church had to finally be left behind as the General Synod exercised a strong dynamic to inclusion. The record of this celebratory time, the union of the Secession and General Synods of Ulster, evidences the difficulties in avoiding exclusivism, calling denominations to be aware that even when exercising a hermeneutic of inclusion the possibilities of exclusion are very real. These complex dynamics, the interweaving of inclusion and exclusion, are illuminated by Liechty and Clegg in their study of sectarianism in Northern Ireland. They warn, 'that every new inclusion creates an opportunity for exclusion',[11] and if this is ignored the result can be an unwanted or unintended experience of exclusion.

> Those who are conscious of a new and hard-won unity with former antagonists, while also remaining keenly aware that the new unity retains ample difference requiring attention, may then give less attention to how the newly united parties are regarding those outside their circle. In fact the bond that now unites them can serve as a barrier to those outside. Furthermore, a negative regard for outsiders can be an easy, though spurious,

> way of nurturing unity within any relationship, perhaps especially a new and tentative one.[12]

The churches cannot, therefore, avoid a commitment to *semper reformanda* even in the experience of union and inclusion. This commitment to *semper reformanda*, particularly with reference to the non-subscribing tradition, was made in a new relationship with the Presbytery of Munster, a non-subscribing Presbytery. In this instance a way was found of addressing the dynamics of exclusion to create inclusion and accommodation.

The union between PCI and the Presbytery of Munster was agreed in 1854. While this union took place with relative ease it was not without its difficulties, given the non-subscribing status of the Presbytery of Munster. However, conversations had taken place and in 1853 a Memorial was presented to the General Assembly from the Presbytery,

> ... stating that its members agreed with its northern brethren in doctrine and in discipline – that they earnestly sought for union – and that they requested the appointment of a committee of conference to consider the best mode for effecting the desired arrangement.[13]

With this Memorial in place the avenue for union between the General Assembly and the Presbytery of Munster was clear and the union was affected in 1854. The Code of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland still allows for those ordained to the teaching and ruling eldership to make subscription in terms compatible with the agreements of 1854. So instead of signing *The Westminster Confession* as the Confession of their faith, elders in the Presbytery of Munster write out and present for retention in the records of the Presbytery the following:

> I, ..., do hereby declare that I believe the Confession of Faith, compiled by the Divines at Westminster, as described in the Code, Chapter 1, paragraphs 12-14, to be founded on and agreeable to the

> Word of God, and as such I declare it to be the confession of my faith.[14]

The non-subscriptionist difficulties, which had seemed so difficult to resolve and had led to a split with the Remonstrants, found some mitigating resolution in the agreement between PCI and the Presbytery of Munster. Liechty and Clegg argue that one possible way of resolving what appears to be conflicting non-negotiables, is in the discovery,

> that the non-negotiability was only apparent; when pressed hard on the matter, a group discovers that it had falsely elevated this particular stance to the realm of the non-negotiable, and compromise is in fact possible, whether willingly or grudgingly.[15]

It could be argued that the arrangement between PCI and the Presbytery of Munster was an act of mitigation, seeking, 'to nullify destructive consequences,'[16] in PCI's relationship with the Non-Subscribing Church. However, as I turn to the history of inter-church relationships in the twentieth century, it will become clear that if this were a mitigating act, the possibilities for new relationship with the Non-Subscribing Church were never developed. In fact, it might be more honest to admit that the prophetic dimensions of the act of uniting the two Synods in 1840 lost energy in the latter half of the twentieth century and can be retrieved back into Irish Presbyterian memory.

3. Irish Presbyterians and inter-church relationships on the island of Ireland

From 1900 onwards there developed, within PCI, an increased sense of the need to develop links with other churches. In this section I will examine the opportunities that existed for developing variegated notions of unity which could enable engagement with other denominations. I will assess how far PCI was able to assimilate those notions in a way which

liberated them for engagement. I will draw extensively on the work of Carlisle Patterson, who, 'for many Irish Presbyterians ... came to personify the ecumenical movement.'[17] Patterson, a minister of PCI throughout his life, worked in a variety of settings including Wilson College, Bombay and the congregations of Conlig, Bangor, and Crescent, Belfast. His ecumenical views were widely known and,

> [i]t was widely believed that it was because of his ecumenical image that, in 1965 and 1967, he was not appointed to important administrative posts in the Church, the General Assembly in both cases rejecting the recommendation of its own Nomination Board.[18]

It was, then, because of his experience and ecumenical commitment that Patterson was able to turn a critical eye on the history of PCI's interchurch relationships. That critical eye was, it must be emphasised, always the eye of an insider, his account being, 'history as lived, from the inside, rather than history as observed, from the outside.'[19]

In Irish Presbyterianism, the first proposal regarding relationships with other Protestant churches came in 1904 from the Rev. J. A. Bain, minister of Westport and New Port, Co. Mayo. The Memorial requested that the General Assembly arrange the mutual exchange of delegations between The General Assembly and Methodist Conference and proposed a joint committee to confer on matters of common interest.[20] The proposal was agreed and sent to the relevant committee which reported in 1905:

> It was agreed to enter into correspondence with the Methodist Church with a view to appointing a Joint Committee to consider questions of common interest.[21]

With the assent of the Methodist Church in Ireland (henceforth MCI) the first meeting of this Joint Committee took

place on October 10th, 1905, in Dublin where practical issues, such as education, rather than theological issues, were addressed. Emphasis was made on denominational loyalty and the intention of the committee to maintain that loyalty, while at the same time working co-operatively with others where it was possible. They did maintain the hope that there would be prayer for, and aspiration to move away from, divisions within the Church. A lengthy quotation from the minutes of the 1907 General Assembly illustrates some of the complexities facing the Joint Committee:

> In the course of their work the Committee have felt the necessity of the formulation of some fundamental principles which should guide them in carrying out their instructions. They submit the following as being of most importance at the present, and suggest that they be adopted by both Churches: -
>
> 1. That the appointment of this Joint Committee is not to be understood as in any way lessening the duty of denominational loyalty, or as suggesting that it is a matter of indifference as to which Church members of either Church attach themselves.
> 2. That in all acts of co-operation suggested by the Joint Committee and sanctioned by the Churches it shall be a recognised principle that the attachment of members to their own Churches should be in every possible way safeguarded.
> 3. That both Churches hold that until God vouchsafes further light on the question of Re-union it is the duty of each Church to provide with ordinances and attach to herself and train up in affection and loyalty to herself all groups of her members whom she can reasonably and without justifiable waste of the Church's means reach with her services.
>
> On the whole, while the task before the Committee is one which cannot be too carefully dealt with, especially at its commencement, the Committee are encouraged in the hope that definite results will come in time from their effort, and that the prayers and aspirations of all in both Churches who deplore differences in the body of Christ will not be in vain.[22]

For those who viewed the work of the Joint Committee with excitement and enthusiasm, there was the need for clarity about the delicate issue of denominational loyalty. While not wanting to undermine denominational loyalty, and thereby the PCI's position within the Joint Committee, the fundamental principles, developed by the Committee and accepted by the General Assembly, provide witness to the call of unity on the life of the church in its denominational relationships. The matter of unity and denominational loyalty could not be 'too carefully dealt with' but the courage of PCI and MCI in facing the complex challenges of living unity from within their denominational structures is evident. It was acknowledged that 'denominational loyalty' was not lessened by their engagement with one another, but also that the work and prayers of, 'all in both Churches who deplore differences in the body of Christ will not be in vain.'

While firmly marking their denominational boundaries, the Joint Committee provided a model of unity which enabled engagement and the expression of *koinonia*. This *koinonia* was one in which enmity and fear, as discussed in this chapter, part 1, section 4, were removed from their relationship and evidenced in continued engagement. At the same time, the limitations of a *koinonia* ethic, recognised in section 5 of the earlier part of this chapter, in its tendency to avoid hard structural implications, were challenged by clearly stating the vision of definite results.

The enthusiasm for building relationships with other denominations was in evidence again at the 1910 General Assembly when a Memorial was received from the Synod of Dublin referring to the friendliness of other Protestant groups and urged suitable action. In light of the Memorial the General Assembly resolved as follows:

> The Assembly rejoices at the fact that there is a growing recognition of the duty of trying to remove divisions and causes of division in the Church of Christ, and that there is an increasing desire after unity among the various branches of the Church. In this country especially the union of Evangelical Churches is an ideal ever to be kept before Christian people, the attainment of which is to be earnestly prayed for. Though such organic union does not seem within sight, the Assembly feels it to be most important that the Protestant Churches of this country should cultivate friendly relations and co-operate in the things pertaining to the advancement of the Kingdom of God, in regard to which common action might be wisely taken. Accordingly, the Assembly appoints a Committee to co-operate in such matters with any committee appointed by the Synod of the Anglican Church or by any other Evangelical Church.[23]

The General Assembly also set November 6th aside as a day of prayer for co-operation among the churches.[24] At this period, then, Irish Presbyterian interest in co-operation among the churches was not the preserve of the marginalized few but a matter of prayer for the whole church. The impulse towards unity was maintaining its momentum and, following this Memorial, the Committee on Co-operation with other Evangelical Churches in Ireland was set up. In 1912 the General Assembly instructed the Joint Committee to look into the issue of mutual recognition between Presbyterians and Anglicans and a report was returned to the 1915 General Assembly.[25] Having little success they reported that:

> ... it was Anglican insistence on a rigid interpretation of the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer that became the sticking point in the conversations, effectively putting an end to any possibility of developing theological discussions.[26]

Clearly, the Presbyterians felt themselves to be driven strongly in the direction of mutual recognition, but they were restrained by the concerns of the Anglican participants. However, the dialogue adapted itself to a form in which all

could fully engage, maintaining the dynamic towards inclusion, and thereafter the Joint Committee focussed on social issues. A model to express unity emerged to accommodate all the parties to the dialogue and maintain the impulse towards unity. There was also success in that these groups (Methodists, Anglicans and Presbyterians in Ireland) joined in the formation of the United Council of Christian Churches and Religious Communities in Ireland in 1922. The Council included PCI, MCI, Congregational Union, Church of Ireland, Moravian Church, Non-subscribing Church, and representatives of The Society of Friends. It held its first meeting on January 23rd, 1923 and framed its intention:

> ... to promote the physical, moral, and social welfare of the people, and the extension of the rule of Christ among all nations and over every region of human life.[27]

Meanwhile, Irish Presbyterians were not idle regarding relationships with other churches. In 1924 the General Assembly resolved to explore union with other Evangelical churches and issued an invitation accordingly.[28] However,

> [t]he response to the invitation issued by the convener of the Committee on Co-operation with other Evangelical Churches must have proved disappointing to the Assembly when it was presented in 1926; the only positive reply coming from the Congregational Union, which had appointed a committee to confer with the Assembly committee.[29]

After conversation with representatives of the Congregational Union the PCI representatives believed the chance of union to be remote.[30] Resultant waning in enthusiasm regarding unions was met by reinvigorated optimism about unity and union by the 1930 Lambeth Conference and a request was consequently received from the General Synod of the Church of Ireland requesting a meeting with representatives of PCI. They

met in 1932 and discussed the sacraments. Reciprocal arrangements could not be reached and so,

> ... it was that after four plenary sessions and sixteen sub-committee meetings spread over a period of three years the conversations terminated: the cause of the breakdown having centred on the refusal of one of the Churches to recognise the validity of the Orders and Sacraments of the other. Over thirty years were to elapse before the two Churches were again to engage in conversations on Church unity.[31]

This period of Irish Presbyterian involvement in discussions with other denominations reveals a commitment to a concern for unity with other Christians. The movement towards unity focussed on resolving theological and ecclesiological differences so that unions could be achieved. While considerable energy was expended in this task of resolving differences, there were many disappointments. Relationships were developed, particularly with MCI and the Church of Ireland, but also with other evangelical churches. Despite the constraints from within, in the form of commitment to denominational loyalty, and from without, particularly in the inability to resolve the matter of mutual recognition, other models of unity were already beginning to emerge. These alternative models for relating to other denominations mirrored what was happening in the WCC, as discussed in the first part of this chapter, section 3.

Discussions with MCI continued and mutual statements were produced in 1937 recognising each other's sacraments, allowing pulpit exchange, and affirming joint charges. A different kind of unity, involving acceptance and affirmation of diversity, was emerging, while full organic unity remained on the agenda. Both denominations agreed that, if missionary and evangelistic efforts were to be shared, they needed to look further at union. In 1939 a brief doctrinal statement was

presented and accepted in two parts: firstly affirming agreement on the Fundamental articles of Faith, the Bible as containing all that is necessary for salvation and the supreme standard of faith and practice; secondly agreeing on the relationship between God's grace and man's free will.

In 1941 the Joint Committee presented a scheme to the General Assembly for the management of circuits and congregations with regard to the different churches, but the debate was eventually knocked off course in 1944 when the question of itinerancy was raised for the first time. The time had come for the General Assembly to give a view on this matter and it sought permission to prepare a statement. That statement was presented to the 1946 General Assembly and it included the advantages and disadvantages of itinerancy as understood by the committee, a scheme for variations in itinerancy and a request for consideration of the report by Kirk Sessions and Presbyteries who would return reports of their deliberations by February 1947. When the reports were returned 28 Presbyteries had responded, 15 opposing and 9 favouring some scheme of itinerancy. The matter was decided and the issue discharged. Relationships with MCI continued, the Joint Committee reporting to the General Assembly in 1948 that there was co-operation between Edgehill Methodist College and the Presbyterian College, that congregations were united in the South and West of Ireland and that there were co-operative plans for church extension. Again a different kind of unity was being affirmed in the relationships between PCI and MCI, a unity that held distinctiveness and separation alongside a dynamic to be and do together what could be done together. This did not mean that discussions on the nature of unity, or how it might be supported structurally, were at an end. It was agreed that the Committee on Faith and Order and the Committee on co-operation with other Evangelical Churches in

Ireland would be united to form the Inter-Church Relations Committee.[32] As Bailie notes, the PCI was to lift its sights to the wider ecumenical field.

> As in the past when discussions of the union of the Irish Churches had come to nought, the attention of the Assembly was now raised to the wider ecumenical field, and the Inter-Church Relations Committee concluded its 1948 report by reminding the Church of the importance of the first General Assembly of the World Council of Churches due to meet at Amsterdam – the Assembly having accepted an invitation to join the Council in 1939.[33]

In 1966 the Joint Committee became the Irish Council of Churches (henceforth, ICC). Delegates reported annually to the General Assembly, which continues to nominate delegates to serve on the committees of ICC and also provides financial support. These co-operative ventures showed a spirit of openness to the notion of union and co-operation.

This activity was largely in line with what was happening among the churches across the world and, '[t]he years from 1945 onwards saw a greatly enhanced ecumenical dynamic.'[34] Relationships with MCI have been particularly significant over the years and in 1963 the first meeting was held between Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

In 1964 conversations began, and became more formally known as the Tripartite Consultation in 1968, between MCI, PCI and the Church of Ireland. By 1969 they had agreed statements on scripture, the church, the sacraments and creeds. But a joint statement on ministry remained impossible and in 1979 the General Assembly sought clarification of the matter, resolving,

> [t]hat the General Assembly, believing that the climate of opinion in our Church does not suggest readiness to consider a scheme of union at present with the Church

> of Ireland and Methodist Church, approve the action of the Tripartite Consultation in deciding that the best way forward would be to consider what was meant by and involved in full mutual recognition of ministers.[35]

What unity meant was being openly contested within the General Assembly and it was becoming clear that organic unity would, at this time, be nearly impossible to achieve. The danger was that in rejecting organic unity all forms of unity would be rejected and the strong dynamics to unity within Irish Presbyterianism suppressed. The question of ministry was to dog the consultations, but the General Assembly continued to support the work of the Tripartite Consultation, resolving in 1983, '[t]hat the General Assembly welcome the progress that has been made in the Tripartite Consultation, and give approval of its proposed programme for the next three to five years.'[36] However, the success of the Tripartite Consultation was to be undermined in 1989. At its 1989 meeting, the General Assembly overturned its agreement to participate in the Tripartite Consultation and PCI withdrew. The Irish Church Relations Committee reported,

> [f]ollowing the decision of Assembly last year not to enter the proposed Theological Working Party to replace the Tripartite Consultation much time and thought was given by the Committee to the way ahead. The Committee was aware of the fact that resolutions are coming to both the Church of Ireland General Synod and the Methodist Conference to establish a Church of Ireland/Methodist Joint Theological Working Party, and is concerned to keep in contact with whatever may develop.[37]

In accordance with these sentiments, the committee submitted a resolution which would enable the General Assembly to authorise, 'that the Tripartite Consultation be succeeded by a new Joint Theological Working Party'.[38] However, an amendment, in the name of Rev. J. E. H. Lynch

and seconded by Rev. Dr. E. H. Uprichard, was received and it was put to the General Assembly,

> [t]hat the General Assembly recognise that the Tripartite Consultation has come to the end of the five year period of work set out by the three Churches. That it is not in a position to present a plan of union, nor does it believe that the Church would be ready to receive such a plan. That there are no prospects for an early visible unity of the three Churches.[39]

The business, having lapsed beyond its stated time earlier in the day, was taken in late session, before a small representation of the whole General Assembly. The amendment was carried and the resolution recognising the end of the Tripartite Consultation passed by 66 votes for and 62 against. 22 of those present signed dissent to the decision. The following year a resolution was passed which may be viewed as more conciliatory in tone,

> [t]hat the General Assembly note the proposal of the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland, its partners in the former Tripartite Consultation, to engage in a joint theological working party in succession to the Tripartite Consultation. It assures them of its prayerful interest, and of its continuing concern for '*that unity which is both God's will and His gift to the Church*'.[40] [italics added]

The move to disengage from the Tripartite Consultation was argued on the basis that organic unity seemed unachievable. This, however, betrays a lack of understanding of the contested and dialogical nature of the idea of unity, and a resistance to the type of unity which was being assumed. The already existing and more varied schemes and styles for expressing the impulse towards unity, such as the discussions on social issues developed by the Joint Committee, were being overlooked. The dynamic toward unity was not, however, precluded, for further acts of

co-operation came about because of practical and pastoral needs. For example, in the Shannon area there were not enough Protestants for one denomination and so the Shannon Scheme developed as a matter of co-operation between MCI, PCI and Church of Ireland. In October 1961 services began to be conducted alternatively. The Church of Ireland also provided premises for this new joint venture, their new building, Christ Church, being dedicated in July 1962. This was a significant act of co-operation between churches who could not always agree on matters of doctrine and practice. Carlisle Patterson notes that, 'the significance of Christ Church as a small but imaginative ecumenical experiment seems to have been largely overlooked in more recent years.[41]

The impetus for conversation and commitment beyond denominational attachment, an impetus which invigorated Presbyterian involvement in the Tripartite Consultation, was also seen in the involvement of PCI in the Irish Inter-Church Meeting. In 1973 the first Irish Inter-Church Meeting took place between Methodists, Anglicans and Presbyterians, at the Ballymascanlon Hotel, Republic of Ireland. The General Assembly was not prepared to permit its representatives to discuss the whole field of ecumenism but instructed them to focus on matters to do with Church and Community. Uneasiness in some quarters brought a proposal for withdrawal in 1974 but, despite this discontent, meetings continued and in 1983 the General Assembly agreed that more frequent meetings were necessary. In 1983 it was resolved,

> [t]hat the General Assembly are pleased to record the meeting of the Ballymascanlon Inter-Church Conference, and urge more frequent and regular meetings to build on what has been achieved and to face the issues which are divisive in Inter-Church and community relations.[42]

The 1970s and 1980s were deeply violent years in Northern Ireland, the Troubles having reached a level of violence which resulted in widespread death and destruction. The churches faced the challenge of speaking out for peace and the resolution of differences. It was during those years that the 'Four Church Leaders' (Methodist, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic) began to meet. They issued statements, called people to prayer and met with government ministers. In the face of a conflicted and violently divided society, the churches spoke together against the violence, encouraging peaceful means of resolving differences.

These years were also years during which Irish Presbyterianism evidenced a strong impulse away from co-operation. In 1983, Memorials from Armagh, Tyrone and Ballymena came to the General Assembly requesting that its members be asked to desist from joint worship within Roman Catholic churches. In 1989 participation in the new ecumenical Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland was rejected on the grounds that the new ecumenical instrument would show the same deficiencies as the WCC, tending to worrying compromise and political involvement. Others within PCI feared the further isolation of PCI for, as we shall see in the following section, PCI had already withdrawn from membership of the WCC. Arguments were presented regarding the basis of the new Council of Churches which would decide who could be accepted into membership. Reporting to the General Assembly in 1989, the Ad hoc Committee on the Inter-Church Process argued that the basis for membership was open, '...to a great divergence of interpretation.'[43] This argument, together with recognition that the Roman Catholic Church would probably be members of the new Council, and concern regarding the political dimension of some issues taken up by ecumenical bodies, did not constrain the Ad hoc Committee which

proposed that, 'the Presbyterian Church in Ireland agrees to participate in the proposed ecumenical body for Britain and Ireland as a full member church.[44] An amendment, in the name of Rev. Prof. John Thompson and seconded by Rev. D. J. McKelvey, was put,

> [t]hat the Presbyterian Church in Ireland agrees to participate in the proposed ecumenical body for Britain and Ireland as an Associate Member for a period of three years; this to be reviewed at the end of that time. It requests the Inter-Church meeting to take the steps necessary to implement that decision.[45]

This latter was an attempt, clearly intended to deflect a negative response from the General Assembly, to keep PCI involved as much as possible with the new Council. However, the amendment was lost and the resolution agreeing membership was also lost, 289 members voting for and 453 against. 99 members of the General Assembly recorded their dissent.

In relationships with the Roman Catholic Church it seemed that PCI had travelled far from the generous resolution that was passed in 1964, as the Second Vatican Council met:

> That the General Assembly recognise that there is no official change in doctrine in the Roman Catholic Church, but welcome every indication of a desire for reform within that Church, and the greater opportunities of friendship and co-operation between Roman Catholics and Protestants which now exist in many places …[46]

The years since the General Assembly had agreed the above generous words, were turbulent years. The increase in violence and sectarian conflict, the consequent fear of differences and the need to identity with one's own, and the impacts of long-running conflict and its effects on all sections of the community, perhaps go some way to explaining the

deterioration in relationships with the Roman Catholic Church. The close identification of religious affiliation with political aspiration led to complexity in both political and ecclesial terms, complicating relationships between denominations. However, the years around the meeting of the Second Vatican Council were years of great activity. 1964 saw the first ecumenical conference at Glenstal Abbey, Limerick, a conference which still continues today, and in 1965 a Presbyterian minister, Rev. Ray Davey, founded the Corrymeela Community of Reconciliation. These impulses for co-operation and understanding were met by other strong counter-dynamics in Northern Ireland, and, as Carlisle Patterson notes, these forces were to have an influence on relationships between Protestants and Roman Catholics:

> There were strong forces in the Northern Ireland situation, however, including Paisleyism and the Orange Order, which were dedicated to resisting fiercely any suggestion that Protestants and Roman Catholics could treat one another as brothers and sisters belonging to the one Church of Jesus Christ.[47]

These forces were to show themselves in the General Assembly debate regarding membership of the WCC, a debate which withdrew PCI from membership in 1980 and will be recounted in the next section. Yet the story of Irish Presbyterian involvement in the ecumenical movement at world level is as complex as the story of involvement on the island of Ireland. The story demonstrates the contested nature of unity as an aspiration and the models of unity, already accepted and unchallenged, which often went unnoticed in the debate about the WCC.

Ultimately, the story of relationships between Presbyterians and other denominations in Ireland may be read as one of the deepening entrenchment of denominational loyalty; equally it may be read as a failure to acknowledge the

dynamics towards unity which did exist within the denomination and which were beginning to challenge the idea of unity as meaning only 'organic unity'. These dynamics towards unity found varied concrete expressions in inter-church relationships, liberating the church for a denominationalism which was engaged with others, receiving their witness and moving in and out of their hermeneutical space, as they moved in and across the boundaries of Presbyterian hermeneutical space. The story of PCI's involvement in the WCC must be probed further to discover if the same issues at stake in Ireland were obvious at world level and whether it was the case, as in Ireland, that the varied expressions of unity were expressed despite a belief that organic unity was to be resisted.

4. Irish Presbyterians and the WCC

When the WCC was founded in 1948 PCI was among its founding members. Any private unease that was felt among members of the General Assembly was not expressed publicly until 1954. The matter was raised in the form of a query about the level of expenses paid to delegates attending the WCC and the consequent cost to the church, the matter being referred to the Business Committee for consideration.[48]

Direct concerns about the WCC were expressed in a Memorial from the Cavan Presbytery to the 1961 General Assembly.[49] The Memorial expressed the belief that large numbers of Presbyterians were concerned about certain pronouncements from the WCC. The Inter-Church Relations Committee was asked to look at PCI's membership of the WCC as they deemed some of its activity to be unacceptably political. In 1962 the Inter-Church Relations Committee asked the General Assembly to affirm its membership of the WCC but their report was sent to Presbyteries for consideration. It was

not until 1964 that this matter was resolved by the General Assembly which passed a resolution:

> ... believing that a clear understanding of the constitution and practice of the WCC shows that such membership involves no surrender of our Reformed and Presbyterian witness, and moreover, that it presents a unique opportunity to make our witness effective where it may be heard, as an essential part of our evangelical witness.[50]

So strong was the feeling that churches should not do separately what they could do together that a resolution was passed encouraging the Boards and Committee of PCI to co-operate with other churches in Ireland.[51] It was clear that the church was becoming polarised on the issue of WCC membership and that the contested nature of unity was being obscured as factions developed. Those experiencing disenchantment with the idea of unity, and those whose theological convictions did not permit them to engage structurally with other denominations, found an opening to oppose membership of the WCC in 1969. The WCC's Programme to Combat Racism established a Special Fund for its work in 1969 and in 1970 that fund made grants available to a number of organisations struggling for racial justice. The perceived political nature of this grant aid and the argument that the WCC was supporting terrorist organisations enabled those who were not in favour of WCC membership to bring their objections and a proposal for withdrawal from the WCC. This was a time when terrorism was impacting Northern Irish society to such an extent that any organisation across the world which resembled a terrorist organisation could not be countenanced. The effects of terrorism were hitting the unionist community very hard and some members of PCI, believing the Special Fund to be supporting terrorism, argued against membership of the WCC. Others may have considered this to be a providential

opportunity to argue for withdrawal from ecumenical engagement.

The Inter-Church Relations Board was asked to investigate the Special Fund and in 1972 the General Assembly passed a resolution affirming membership of the WCC.[52] However, discontent continued to rise and in November 1978 a Special Assembly was called, suspending membership of the WCC until a decision could be reached at the 1979 General Assembly.

When the General Assembly met in 1979 Memorials were received from the Presbyteries of Armagh, Ballymena, North Belfast, Coleraine, Down, Iveagh, Newry, Omagh and Tyrone. All of the Memorials based their argument on the belief, '[t]hat in spite of the representations made by our Church, the WCC has continued its policy of making grants to terrorist organisations.'[53] Two requests were made by the Memorials:

(a) to accept notice of motion to the General Assembly of June, 1980: 'that the General Assembly rescind its former decisions in regard to our Church's membership of the W.C.C. and terminate that membership';
(b) to renew suspension of the Church's membership of the W.C.C. until the aforementioned General Assembly of June, 1980.[54]

The proposals were brought by Rev. R. Dickinson and seconded by Rev. R. E. H. Uprichard. At the 1980 General Assembly attempts were made to hold off debate on the matter. It was proposed that the debate be adjourned until after the 1983 WCC Assembly in Vancouver but the proposal was lost, 290 for and 619 against.[55] Rev. Professor J. M. Barkley, historian and ecumenist, proposed that the Standards of the Church be affirmed and membership continued. He argued that it was from within an understanding of the Standards of the Church that ecumenical engagement could be affirmed.

> In this faith and discipline the Assembly give thanks to God for men of Christian vision who challenged the Churches to found the World Council of Churches, thus enabling Churches, in spite of their differences, to witness together to the world...[56]

Barkley's proposal was lost, 448 votes against and 388 in favour. The motion for withdrawal from membership being put, it was carried by 433 votes in favour of withdrawal and 327 against. Organised opposition to membership of the WCC had achieved its purpose and PCI's membership of the WCC was withdrawn. Carlisle Patterson expresses some of the feelings experienced by those who had wished to remain:

> Like many others within the General Assembly and beyond, I still find the decision to withdraw deeply disturbing, not just in itself, but for what it implied about the tendency to isolationism and self-justification, which was increasingly prevalent within Irish Presbyterianism.[57]

Indeed, he felt it to be an act of 'self-immolation, depriving the church of unparalleled opportunities for that partnership and stimulus of which it is constantly in need.'[58] These were years far distant from the days when PCI had been a founding member of the WCC and had resolved that, 'the prayer leaflet prepared by the World Council be sent to each minister of a congregation, the cost to be defrayed from the Incidental Fund.'[59]

These were also years of increasing disappointment and disillusionment for those who were concerned for the unity of the church. Denominationalism, evidenced in isolation and separatism, overtook the dynamic towards unity, many fearing the domination of a meta-church structure and involvement with the Roman Catholic Church. That the dynamic towards unity was still expressed, as it is today, in membership of the

World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Council for European Churches, is witness to the resilience of PCI in the face of contentious and divisive debate. Also exemplary is the continued involvement of many Presbyterians in ecumenical activity, locally, regionally and at world level. For some this is a way of life, while for others it is at great cost.[60] It also has to be noted that involvement in bodies such as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Council for European Churches is unlikely to be construed as ecumenical, because in those bodies the dynamics of encountering those who are different are obscured by what is held in common. To be significant in expressing the ongoing dynamics of inclusion and unity that exist within PCI, involvement in such organisations will have to become more widely recognised and accepted by Irish Presbyterians as one way in which the impulse towards unity is being maintained.

5. Conclusion: Irish Presbyterianism can reclaim an impulse towards unity

The founding of the General Assembly, in1840, was an act of union between the General and Secession Synods of Ulster. The union was, however, to put greater distance between the new denomination and the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church. While the impulse towards unity took on energy that was sustained well into the twentieth century, it has to be recognised that the complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion seem to have gone largely unnoticed. They were addressed, to some degree, in the agreement between PCI and the Presbytery of Munster in 1854. However, the possibilities of other unions, specifically with the Non-Subscribing Church, were never fully explored.

The energetic impulse towards unity continued up until the years following Vatican II. The Very Rev. Dr. John Dunlop,

former Moderator of PCI, recognises the significance of the 1960s, for,

> after Vatican II, Presbyterians thought that relationships were improving and welcomed the change. Prior to 1968 there was some indication that the Presbyterian Church was trying to get beyond propaganda to the truth.[61]

This optimism was, however, dampened and complicated by the 'Troubles' which took a significant shift in the direction of violence in the late 1960s. It is in no small measure due to the years of turbulent unrest and open conflict that the community in Northern Ireland separated, each finding safety among people of the same political aspiration. It has to be considered to what degree political circumstances influence the decisions of the General Assembly for it was in the 1970s and 1980s, when violence was at its peak, that movement against ecumenical engagement was at its height and resulted in withdrawal from the WCC and Tripartite Consultation, and in refusal to enter into membership of the new Council for Churches in Britain and Ireland. The vociferous arguments, which resulted in sharp factional debate made against engagement which might lead to organic unity, obscured the models of unity which were operating harmoniously at local and national level. Equally, significant ecumenical engagement at world level, in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Council for European Churches, has been overlooked, in PCI, as significant ecumenical engagement.

It is my argument that, since the 1970s, Irish Presbyterianism has been weighed down by factionalism and a narrow vision of unity, which has seriously compromised its critical loyalty to God. Presbyterians will admit that they are not readily given to nuance or to seeing complexity, for,

> Presbyterian language does not have too many layers to it, it does not possess too much flexibility. Presbyterians may not make very good negotiators. There is both strength and weakness in this. The strength is that everyone knows where everyone stands. The weakness is that people from this tradition may be inflexible.[62]

If, however, Irish Presbyterians are to remain committed to *semper reformanda* there is a clear challenge before them to engage in relationships with other denominations. Such engagement can be underpinned by the significant founding of the General Assembly in an act of union in 1840 and may be sustained through acknowledgment of the various models of unity which are already in operation throughout the church. If PCI does not face the challenge of engagement then there is a serious risk of domesticating God and tending to isolation, rather than mission. The challenge, as was noted in the conclusion of part 1, is specifically one of maintaining a rooted integrity while finding ways in which to move in and out of one another's interpretive space. This movement is a matter of deeper conversion to God, enabling denominationally-bound churches to open up interpretive space in which to question themselves and learn from and with others. Ultimately, it is the challenge to choose a style of ethical living which enables the conversion of church and world. It is to the development of an ethic for such conversion that I now turn.

[1] The Secession Church of Scotland established congregations in Ireland in 1741. In 1818 they formed into The Presbyterian Synod of Ireland distinguished by the name Seceders.
[2] James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland: comprising the civil history of the Province of Ulster, from the accession of James the First with a preliminary sketch of the progress of the Reformed Religion in Ireland during the sixteenth century and an appendix, consisting of original prayers* (Belfast: William Mullan, 1867) p174.
[3] W. D. Bailie, 'The First General Assembly and the steps leading to its formation,' in, R.F.G. Holmes & R. Buick Knox eds., *The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1840 – 1990: A celebration of Presbyterian witness* (Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1990) p7. Bailie notes that the General Synod often accused the Seceders of getting involved in congregational disputes, setting up rival congregations and seizing Synod property. The Seceders accused the Synod of lax doctrine and discipline.
[4] The *regium donum*, or King's bounty, was introduced as financial support for Dissenting ministers during the reign of Charles II.
[5] 'However, a second generation of ministers began to take over from the early protagonists, acrimony began to give way to co-existence which in time led in places to co-operation and even, on occasion, to an exchange of pulpit.' W. D. Bailie, 'The First General Assembly and the steps leading to its formation,' in, R.F.G. Holmes & R. Buick Knox eds., *The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1840 – 1990,* p7.
[6] James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p476.
[7] 'Minutes of The General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland: consisting of The General Synod of Ulster and The Presbyterian Synod of Ireland distinguished by the name Seceders: held in Belfast, July 1840, in, *Minutes of Assembly Vol. 1, 1840-1850* (Belfast: Paul Kelso, Joy's Court, MDCCXL) p28.
[8] Ibid. p28.
[9] Rev. Alexander Kerr, Portadown, and Rev. James Glasgow, Castledawson, were appointed as missionaries to India.
[10] James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p481.
[11] Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2001) p166.
[12] Ibid. p166.
[13] James Seaton Reid, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p500. 'A memorial read from the Presbytery of Munster, stating, that they are the same with this General Assembly in doctrine and church government; assigning reason why a union between them and this church is most desirable.' Minutes of the General Assembly 1850-60 (Presbyterian Historical Society) p202.
[14] *The Code: The Book of The Constitution and Government of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* (Belfast, Church House 1980, reprinted with amendments 1997) paragraph 205(5) p104 & paragraph 212 (6) p111.
[15] Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism,* p226f.
[16] Ibid. p229.
[17] Finlay Holmes, 'Foreword,' in, Carlisle Patterson, *Over The Hill: Ecumenism in the Irish Presbyterian Church* (Belfast: T. C. Patterson, 1997) p1.
[18] Ibid. p1.
[19] Ibid. p1.

[20] 'A memorial was read from the Rev. J. A. Bain, asking the Assembly (1) to arrange for an interchange of deputations at the annual meetings of the General Assembly and of the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland, and (2) to propose to the Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland the appointment of a Joint Committee of members of the Mission Boards of the two Churches to confer from time to time on matters of common interest. The memorial was received.' 'Minutes of the Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, held at Dublin, June, 1904,' in, *Minutes of the proceedings of The General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland Vol. X. 1901-1905* (Belfast: Published by order of the General Assembly) p836

[21] W. D. Bailie, 'Church Relations within Ireland, 1904-1948,' in R.F.G. Holmes & R. Buick Knox eds., *The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1840 – 1990: A celebration of Presbyterian witness* (Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1990) p205.

[22] 'Minutes of the proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, held at Belfast, June, 1907,' in, *Minutes of the proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland Vol. XI 1906-1910 (*Belfast: Published by order of the General Assembly) p352.

[23] 'Minutes of the proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, held at Belfast, June 1910,' *Minutes of the proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Vol. XI. 1906-1910*, p1141.

[24] 'Further, the Assembly appoints Sabbath, 6th November, as a day on which earnest prayer shall be made in all its congregations for the spirit of brotherly kindness and co-operation to be poured out on all branches of the Church of Christ in Ireland, that hindrance to unity may be swept out of the way.' Ibid. p1141f.

[25] 'That the Assembly instruct the Committee to take advantage of their friendly interviews with the representatives of the former Established Church to arrange, if possible, for the mutual recognition (1) of the status of communicants in passing over on marriage to the other Church; (2) of discipline; and (3) to the ecclesiastical status of members of either Church, especially on a change of ministry.' 'Minutes of the proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, held at Belfast, June 1912,' *Minutes of the proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.* Vol. XII 1911-1915, (Belfast, printed by order of the General Assembly) p370.

[26] W. D. Bailie, 'Church Relations within Ireland, 1904-1948' In R.F.G. Holmes & R. Buick Knox eds., *The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p207.

[27] Ibid. p208.

[28] 'Moved by the Rev. J. S. Rutherford, seconded by the Rev. Dr. James Little, and unanimously resolved – That the Committee be requested to make preliminary investigations as to the possibility of union between this Church and other Evangelical Churches in Ireland, and report to next Assembly.' *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, June, 1924* (Belfast, The Witness Office, Royal Avenue, 1924) p58.

[29] W. D. Bailie, 'Church Relations within Ireland, 1904-1948' In R.F.G. Holmes & R. Buick Knox eds., *The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p209.

[30] The MCI declined the invitation believing the possibility of union to be neither possible nor opportune. The Baptists felt separated by doctrine and the Reformed Presbyterians declined the invitation.

[31] W. D. Bailie, 'Church Relations within Ireland, 1904-1948' In R.F.G. Holmes & R. Buick Knox eds., *The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p216.
[32] 'That the Committee on Faith and Order and the Committee on Co-operation with other Evangelical Churches in Ireland be united, and that the Committee be known as the Committee on Inter-Church Relations, and that this Committee report annually to the General Assembly regarding the nominations to be made to the World Council of Churches, the British Council of Churches, the United Council of Christian Churches in Ireland, and the youth Section in connection with same.' *Minutes of the General Assembly 1944-46* (Presbyterian Historical Society) p31.
[33] W. D. Bailie, 'Church Relations within Ireland, 1904-1948' In R.F.G. Holmes & R. Buick Knox eds., *The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,* p219.
[34] Carlisle Patterson, *Over The Hill: Ecumenism in the Irish Presbyterian Church* (Belfast: T. C. Patterson, 1997) p7.
[35] *Minutes and Directory of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1979* (Belfast: T. H. Jordan Ltd.) p83.
[36] *Minutes and Directory of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1983* (Belfast: T. H. Jordan Ltd.) p53.
[37] 'Report of the Irish Church Relations Committee' pp120-123, *Reports of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1989* (Belfast: Northern Whig, 1989) p121.
[38] Ibid. p146 .
[39] Ibid. p64f.
[40] Ibid. p129. The final, italicised words reflect the understanding of unity as God's will and gift which was accepted across the denominations and within the WCC. PCI, therefore, echoed the wider ecumenical world and its commitments.
[41] Carlisle Patterson, *Over The Hill,* p29.
[42] *Reports of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1983,* p53.
[43] 'Report of the Ad hoc Committee on the Inter-Church Process' *Reports of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1989*, p96.
[44] Ibid. p128.
[45] Ibid. p47.
[46] *Minutes of the General Assembly and Directory of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1964* (Belfast: T. H. Jordan Ltd, 1964) p40.
[47] Carlisle Patterson, *Over The Hill,* p34.
[48] At the 1954 General Assembly it was resolved that, 'the whole matter of payment of delegation expenses to places beyond the limits of the UK, and the nomination of such delegates, be referred to the Business Committee of the Assembly for consideration and report.' *Minutes of the General Assembly 1954-56* (Presbyterian Historical Society) p32. The debate was given real energy with the formation of the Church of North India, discussed at the general Assembly in 1957. By 1962 the General Assembly was taking note of the damage done to relationships with Christians in India (CNI). In 1970 the inauguration of the CNI was attended by representatives of PCI.
[49] *Minutes of the General Assembly 1961-64* (Presbyterian Historical Society) p49.
[50] *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* 1964, p41.
[51] 'That the General Assembly, believing that we are being called 'to do together all things except those which deep differences of conviction compel us to do separately', encourage the Boards and Committees of the Church to develop all appropriate forms of co-operation with other

Churches in Ireland.' *Minutes of the General Assembly and Directory of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1964,* p39.
[52] *Minutes of the General Assembly 1969-72* (Presbyterian Historical Society) p33.
[53] *Annual Reports of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1979* (Belfast: Church House) p118.
[54] *Minutes of the General Assembly 1977-79* (Presbyterian Historical Society) p65.
[55] *Minutes of the General Assembly 1980-82* (Presbyterian Historical Society) p55.
[56] Ibid. p55.
[57] Carlisle Patterson, *Over The Hill,* p40.
[58] Ibid. p41.
[59] Minutes of the General Assembly 1947-49 (Presbyterian Historical Society) p41.
[60] '... the independence of a minister may be constrained by the need to remain pastorally sensitive to the convictions or indeed the prejudices of some elders.' John Dunlop, *A Precarious Belonging: Presbyterians and the Conflict in Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press Ltd., 1995) p30.
[61] Ibid. p55.
[62] Ibid. p101.

CHAPTER 5 A RECONCILING ETHIC: Ecclesia semper reformanda

1. Setting the scene: a question of lifestyle

1.1 The Church in its context

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the Church, to compellingly witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ethical lifestyle, must take account of the local context into which it witnesses. In developing the informing themes and guidelines for an ethic for engagement in a pluralist, secular world, consideration has to be given to the Church's concern to maintain its own distinctive identity, while taking account of context. The notion of rootedness in one's own tradition and the broad tradition of the Church takes account of this concern, enabling engagement with those who are different while not relinquishing distinctiveness. The concern of the Church to be the Church is approached through Seyla Benhabib's idea of the 'concrete' other, developed within a communicative ethic, in response to Habermas's 'generalized' other and examined in section 3.2. The idea challenges churches to be fully engaged in ways which are respectful of others, but also as traditions liberated to be authentically rooted in their own traditions.

An ethic for engagement which is meaningful for all parties within the dialogical space, in this chapter known as the public realm, must also take account of influences on the Church, from within and without the tradition,[1] which may sustain and enable, or resist and disempower, encounter with others. Specifically, the churches have to take care not to reflect the divisions of the surrounding society, where space is contested, often violently, as explored in Chapter One. An ethic for engagement with others will, therefore, be informed by hermeneutical awareness, including the hermeneutics of retrieval and suspicion. A hermeneutic of retrieval yields consideration of

sustaining or constraining themes from within a tradition, particularly with reference to that tradition's boundary markers, while a hermeneutic of suspicion facilitates critical questioning of dialogical processes, who is involved in those processes and who is not involved, and the purposes behind involvement. Hermeneutical awareness and understanding is developed in relationship with others, whether they are people of difference within a denomination or in relationships between denominations, or with the diversity of others in the public realm. This was affirmed in Chapter Two where living loyalty to God was explored and in Chapter Four where implications for interchurch relationships were explicated. In the process of developing hermeneutical understanding it is clear, then, that there needs to be openness to others who are different and with whom relationships are being built. Commitment to developing hermeneutical awareness necessarily involves the understanding that there cannot be agreed cohesion of ideas or agreement of outcomes before a process of engagement. The idea of agreement being sought within a process of engagement rather than as a prerequisite to it, will be examined in section 3.3, in the context of the tensions between a communal ethic, as represented by Alasdair MacIntyre, and a communicative ethic, as represented by Jürgen Habermas.

Finally, an ethic for engagement is one in search of transformation, the conversion of world and church, and will inevitably be open to others, including those of other denominational, faith, ethical and philosophical traditions. The challenge of such a level of openness is found in the types of agreements that can be reached, in the sense that they may be less than ideal for any one of the groups party to the encounter within the public realm. The concern that agreements are imperfect, morally and practically, is addressed theologically, in section 3.4, through the appropriation of the idea of the

eschatological proviso, specifically in the work of Sharon Welch. This enables provisional goals to be accepted, with the emphasis on provisionality. It will argued that provisionality also enables the retention of key boundary markers, discussed in Chapter Three as delimiting the degree of change or accommodation open to any tradition if it is to remain rooted and authentic.

The development of an ethic for engagement in the public realm, populated as it is with many different traditions and beliefs, is confronted by a context in which ethical decision-making has shifted to the private realm.[2] David Fergusson, Professor of Systematic Theology and writing from within the Reformed tradition, identifies this movement to the private realm as being the crisis of liberalism, '...seen in the increasing fragmentation of Western societies and the dissociation of citizens from moral traditions, institutions, and communities.[3] As citizens become increasingly divorced from moral traditions which ground them, particularly in their belonging to institutions or communities, the resultant fragmentation and shift of ethical decision-making to the private realm, leads to confusion in the public sphere. Donald Shriver Jr. argues that, '[t]he cry for ethics in the late twentieth century is a cry for 'life'.[4]

In Northern Ireland confusion in the public sphere adds to society's divisions. Following thirty years of violence and sectarian unrest, in Northern Ireland, there is movement towards peace. The Good Friday Agreement, signed in March 1998, was agreed by all the political parties as the framework for making peace. However, the political Agreement seems less and less suitable to deliver the hoped-for peace. Despite long and arduous negotiations there is still disagreement about what the Good Friday Agreement requires. Devolved government has been suspended.

The focus of the dilemma is associated with the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. Broadly speaking, the unionists do not want any party previously with paramilitary connections to sit at the negotiating table until all weapons have been decommissioned; equally, those who previously have had paramilitary connections feel that long ceasefires, since 1994, prove their commitment to political means.

The political parties in Northern Ireland must deal directly with this disagreement if the peace process is to move forward. The IRA Statement of July 26th, 2005 went some way to alleviating the concerns of the unionist community by commanding all IRA volunteers to place their weapons in arms dumps, the process of dumping to be overseen and verified by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning and representatives of the churches, one trusted Protestant and one Roman Catholic. This process was completed and verification offered by the relevant groups in September 2005. However, whether or not the verification process will be adequate for those demanding visible and total decommissioning of paramilitary weaponry remains an open question, or whether, in fact, as seems likely, society will move on from the question.

As part of civil society the churches have a role to play in making peace, having themselves been infected by the divisions in society, as we have seen in the Chapter Four, section 1. For the purposes of seeking an ethic for the churches in Northern Ireland it is essential to note the persistence of the issue of decommissioning and to be clear that Northern Irish society is still deeply divided. Society continues to be marked by mistrust and a lack of belief that each can provide what the other needs to move into the future together. Division is further reflected in the ongoing concern of victims that their suffering will be overlooked and hence diminished, as the political

process is driven forward. A divided society is the difficult context for developing an ethic for engagement in Northern Ireland, to inform and assist the churches to take a significant place in the public realm, seeking the transformation of Church and world.

The political context is only one dimension of Church life. There is evidence of a change in church-going and commitment in Northern Ireland, coinciding with the advent of the peace process. All denominations note the beginnings of a fall-off in attendance. For inner city congregations this is an old story. Protestant congregations, in particular, have experienced falling numbers as Protestants have been moving out of Belfast, particularly from its North & South sides, to the suburbs where life is more peaceful.

I work in a congregation in inner city North Belfast where already a number of Presbyterian congregations have closed their doors or packed up and moved to where their 'people' are. My immediate context, therefore, is a Presbyterian congregation, situated in a now largely Roman Catholic community. This largely Roman Catholic community may, however, be defined only culturally as Roman Catholic. Catholic churches locally report a decline in church attendance, reflecting a secularism which has begun to pervade Northern Irish society. The reality is, therefore, one of working in a Presbyterian congregation within a community which is predominantly nationalist and Roman Catholic by culture, but becoming predominantly secular. Dialogical commitment of denominations to one another is relevant in this context and challenges the evangelical, reformed tradition. Churches cannot afford to be assiduously divorced from one another, or caught up in angry exchange, in a society which needs to move beyond the old divisions and cares less and less about the churches. Within the churches, there is uncertainty how to relate to

neighbours, people of other denominations, and people who claim no religious affiliation. For the congregation in which I work, finding a biblically and theologically informed ethic for being the Church is crucial, both to survival, and to effective mission.

It should be noted that the context of North Belfast cannot be viewed apart from the broader Northern Irish context. North Belfast has known some of the most prolonged and pronounced sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. The community is a patchwork of small communities of Catholics and Protestants, nationalists and unionists, republicans and loyalists, each feeling threatened by the other and fearing domination. The dynamics of community life are closely related to the dynamics of Northern Irish politics. Disagreement, difference and entrenched separation at the level of formal politics is reflected on the streets of North Belfast in continued non-engagement between different sections of the community, sectarian unrest, disputes about parades, and in physical harm to one another. When sectarian competition persists at one level of society, it pervades all of society, providing the context into which churches are called to witness, and challenging them to find ways of making effective witness. The challenge is to develop an ethic to help shape church life and engage churches in effective witness.

1.2 A task for the Church in its context

In circumstances of sectarian competition the Church has responsibility for developing an ethic which will assist members of the Church to live in allegiance to God, bearing effective Christian witness. This ethic is rooted in the firm belief that churches must bear witness in the context in which they find themselves, not simply reflecting the dynamics of that context but critically reflecting on it in the light of the teaching

of scripture, with a commitment to transformation and in collaboration with brothers and sisters in Christ. The ethic will, therefore, provide guidance for Christians, but will also open up the possibility of change both at personal and societal levels. If the Church is to live dialogically, as a means to conversion, one can then ask - is there an ethic that incorporates distinctiveness and inclusion, bearing witness to the uniqueness of Christianity, yet committed to change? The task of this chapter is to outline an ethic that arises from the hub[5] of conversion to God. How does the Christian Church weave its identity around this hub of conversion to God in continuing dialogical lifestyle, reformed and always reforming?

For the churches, it is essential that an ethical framework for engagement be biblically and theologically informed. It will, therefore, have to hold the tension between a commitment to the uniqueness of the Christian message in relation to a secular, pluralist society, and a commitment to conversion through dialogue and engagement. This was explored in Chapter Two, section 3, with regard to the world of the Groupe des Dombes where it was argued that conversion is pivotal to the identity of the Church, critiquing ethnic and all other allegiances which would undermine or challenge allegiance to God.

Further, the ethic will have to take account of commitment to denominational traditions while at the same time recognising that denominations are situated within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. This recognition offers critique to entrenched denominationalism and invites relationships between the denominations as a means by which the churches can experience conversion, and was probed in Chapter Four. It is not possible to take account of all these dynamics without respect for different approaches and needs. The churches need to experience respect which enables them to

openly live and speak their Christian commitment. If the churches assume that they have to be covert about their gospel commitment, and their will for conversion, then they will experience a lack of respect. Equally, if groups within the broader community believe they are thought of as being there to be evangelized, believe they are looked upon as having nothing to offer to a process of transformation, then their experience will be one of lack of respect. Respect comes from genuine acceptance and appreciation of the value of one another's learning and experience. An ethic for engagement will enshrine mutual respect, enabling hearing and listening as a part of the process of transformation to which all must be committed as a means of moving forward.

Christians need to accept change as an essential dialogical dynamic that shapes Christian identity. The need for commitment to change has been the argument throughout this thesis, commitment that arises from the dynamic relationship between God and the Church, God continually calling the Church to faithfulness and the Church constantly responding in fidelity while also renegotiating its loyalties in the light of loyalty to God. In Chapter Two, it was argued that loyalty to God is more central in the Christian life than any other loyalty. Because God is transcendent and self-revealing, loyalty grows and is better understood through dialogical encounter with God. While God's revelation is complete and cannot be added to, the human grasp of God's revelation is fragmentary and fitful. It is in the realm of human understanding that the dialogue must continually take place. As argued in Chapter Three, this dialogue is a hermeneutical process, , which requires the Christian community to be aware of contextual influences, influences rooted in the history and tradition of the Church, and openness to others who contribute to the process of change and transformation in engagement one with the other.

Loyalty to God involves Church members in loyalty to one another. Even when there is obvious difference, the reality of belonging to God surpasses the reality of differences between the churches. Difference is not to be canonized here but rather unity in God, as both gift and task, lived even in difference. In Chapter Four, therefore, it was argued that dialogical encounter with God has implications for interchurch relationships. Identity formed in relationship implies that failed interchurch relationships, or failed *koinonia*, affects the Church's witness in an already divided world.

Recognising commonality and difference, interpretive space and boundaries, the challenge of developing an ethic is one of discovering how to respect difference while engaging with others without whom transformation would be impossible. This ethic will support inter-church engagement but also engagement with the world, enabling Christians to hold fast to the uniqueness of the gospel of Jesus Christ while being open to the God who is the God of the Gospel and of culture. The ethic will, enable engagement with the world but cannot support dominating or separating ideologies. Rather it must support the process of transformation, effectively witnessing to the God of all cultures, as was argued in Chapter Two, section 4, with regard to the work of H. Richard Niebuhr and Miroslav Volf. Witnessing to and seeking encounter with the God of all cultures, in whom and with whom change is valued in the process of conversion, the churches learn more about how to live in faithfulness to the God who calls and sustains them. Keeping in mind concerns about commonality and difference, engagement and distinctiveness, and before I turn to an ethic for engagement, some theological guidelines need to be set for the task ahead.

2. Theological guidelines for an ethic for engagement

2.1 Conversion and the openness of the Church, *ecclesia semper reformanda*

In the Reformed tradition the principle of *ecclesia semper reformanda* commits churches to change. A church, seeking to be reformed and always reforming, has the principle of conversion at its centre. Richard Peace, in his reflections on the significance of Paul's conversion, emphasises how the insights Paul received by the intervention of God on the Damascus Road were to affect all of his life, at every level. Change was unavoidable for Paul as he publicly confessed his experience and allowed that experience to shape how he lived as a follower of Christ.[6] The insights of the Damascus Road brought Paul into a new community where he would often find himself in debate with his brothers and sisters in the faith, with those who had known him before his Damascus Road experience, and with people who did not call themselves Christian. His encounters defined existing insights and formulated new ones, engaging Paul in an ongoing process of change or conversion. Peace notes the impact of Paul's conversion at three levels, in terms of, '...insights, turning, transformation that affect who he is, how he relates to Jews, and what he does within his culture.[7]

With such radical challenges to his relationship with Jesus Christ in whom he had not previously believed, and with the Jewish community of which he had once been a part and could not divorce himself from entirely, change could never be removed from the navigational systems of Paul's life. His conversion had engaged him in ongoing change as he undertook the process of renegotiating his loyalties and living in faithfulness to God. Peace affirms Gaventa's transformation model of conversion, taken up by Falconer, in which no rejection of the past is required but rather mutual response and

commitment which takes account of the perspectives of others. This was discussed in Chapter Four, section 3.1.

This same process of ongoing conversion, of commitment to change, is required from the Church as it seeks to remain true to the God who calls. *The Westminster Confession* expresses this in terms of 'sanctification':

> They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and new spirit created in them, are farther sanctified really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are *more and more* weakened and mortified, and they are *more and more* quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.[8] [Italics added]

It is safe to assume that the practice of ecumenical dialogue has influenced the Roman Catholic Church in re-appropriating this Reformed stress on pilgrim ecclesiology (heralded in Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*) and on the *semper reformanda* echoes here. Throughout this thesis I have sought to indicate appropriate places of agreement and consensus among the churches to illuminate the discussion and employ an ecumenical methodology. It should be noted, therefore, that the principle of conversion[9] in relation to the whole Church is increasingly accepted by the Roman Catholic Church and reaffirmed in *Ut Unum Sint*, the papal encyclical on *Commitment to Ecumenism.*

> In the teaching of the Second Vatican Council there is a clear connection between renewal, conversion and reform. The Council states that 'Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is an institution of human beings here on earth. Therefore, if the influence of events or of the times has led to deficiencies … these should be appropriately

> rectified at the proper moment'. No Christian Community can exempt itself from this call.[10]

Ecclesia semper reformanda, as expressed in conversion, is theologically defining for the task ahead and can be drawn from both the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions. For the Christian Church, with core identity in conversion to God, change is not to be shunned, but owned as pivotal in living loyalty to God above all other loyalties. An ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda* must also incorporate means of conversion and ways to integrate experiences of conversion. The ethic will, therefore, reflect the *koinonia* ethic spoken of in Chapter Four, an ethic that tends towards inclusiveness and not exclusiveness, yet without suppressing their differences or undermining distinctiveness.

Dialogue may be identified as a means to conversion arising from the dialogical relationship between human beings and God as they seek to understand discipleship and live faithful lives. Conversion is inseparable from dialogue for, when authentic dialogue occurs, the participants are called to change. The call to the Church to live dialogically is the call to conversion. When coupled with the motivation to include, dialogue and conversion become means to sustain change in Church and world. The dangers of resisting dialogue, of entrenched denominationalism and exclusivism, were identified in Chapter Four, section 2. In that chapter the churches were challenged to take dialogical living seriously as a commitment to deepening their faithfulness to God, it being noted that resistance to dialogue could become resistance to conversion. From this it can be drawn that in dialogue Church and world are on an equal footing, and through one another come to know the God who is the Creator of all things. Indeed, dialogue may be identified not only as a means to conversion but also as a way to integrate conversion for in dialogue, stories are told, changes

owned and other participants accepted. In this way, the experience of conversion becomes integrated into the life of the churches, their memory and experience, so that change becomes not simply acceptable, but necessary, for churches if they are to bear radical witness to the transforming impact of the Gospel in people's lives.

In a commitment to change, churches express a willingness to place their security solely in God. But there is, at the same time, the need for an ethical framework to provide guidance and encouragement. The framework must always affirm the primacy of belonging to God. In affirming overarching allegiance to God, it is acknowledged that there are parameters to change. For denominations in their encounters with one another, those parameters are set by creeds, confessions and standards. In the public realm the churches, while intent on change and transformation, may find themselves unable to espouse values or practices held by others. An ethical framework must, therefore, take account of those parameters and enable churches to maintain integrity in respect of their boundaries. Fergusson affirms that, '[t]here are times when a position of neutrality between competing ideological forces is inadmissible.'[11] At the same time, given the value placed on dialogue as a means to transformation, the ethic must assist churches to resist the tendency to division and separation. It must also be admitted that such moral absolutes have too often been invoked for trivial or political reasons. For Christians, the process of conversion has value as they seek greater faithfulness to God and an ethical lifestyle which the world can willingly pay attention to.

This notion of conversion is firmly attached, in the Christian tradition, to the doctrine of reconciliation. Reconciliation affirms dialogue and change as means not only to transform relationships but also as a means to restore broken

relationships. Dialogue and change are, therefore, intentions which an ethic for engagement must support. Theologically, the doctrine of reconciliation supports and progresses the idea of conversion, providing further guidance for the development of an ethic for engagement.

2.2 Reconciliation, rooted in conversion and seeking transformation

In Northern Ireland, the word 'reconciliation' has overtones for some of dubious or unacceptable ecumenical activity. Yet reconciliation is a clearly Pauline term for what God in Christ has done for the world.[12] It is an interpersonal term and cannot, therefore, be separated from an understanding of that conversion which is dependent on relationships. I have argued that dialogical relationship with God and with others, specifically with others who are different and who do not make their home within the same hermeneutical space, is crucial in the process of conversion to God. For churches in traditional postures of mutual hostility this will inevitably involve a measure of conversion to one another. The interpersonal nature of the doctrine of reconciliation is particularly relevant in places where relationships have broken down, and is a necessary theological aspect of the movement towards greater fidelity to God.

From within the Reformed tradition, and in search of liberation of Reformed theology as noted in Chapter Four, section 1.4, De Gruchy is strong in his commitment to the idea of reconciliation retaining its theological meaning, particularly when the idea has gained political coinage:

> The relevance of the Christian doctrine of reconciliation is contingent on it retaining its distinct theological meaning even as we engage in exploring and embodying its political significance. The doctrine of reconciliation will be most relevant to social and political life when it is most true to its distinct character.[13]

For his development of the doctrine of reconciliation, De Gruchy turns to the Genesis story of creation, covenant and fall. In the account of the covenantal relationship of faithful stewardship in Eden, the human disobedience which led to alienation and a need for reconciliation, De Gruchy argues the need to find

> ... a profound attempt to describe the nature and destiny, misery and grandeur of humankind from the perspective of faith in God as creator and redeemer, and to do so in a way that relates directly to human experience and social reality.[14]

This founding story provides an interpretive framework for the experience of God's people throughout history, but specifically for the redemptive story of Jesus Christ who makes provision among disobedient and rebellious people for reconciliation with God. This disobedience and rebelliousness infects human relationships, but the redemptive story of Jesus holds out the possibility of reconciliation between God and human beings and also the possibility of reconciliation among human beings. Theologically then, the doctrine of reconciliation not only challenges the Christian community to engagement with others as a sign of redemption, and of their loyalty to God, but also as an occasion to deepen relationship with God, even as relationships with one another are restored. The Lord's Prayer suggests precisely how this deepening of relationship with God impacts relationships with others in the words, 'forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.'[15] It is a mission imperative which takes the incarnation seriously as direct engagement with those who are 'other'. As De Gruchy notes,

> [r]econciliation literally has to do with the way in which God relates to us, the human 'other', and in turn with our relationship to 'the other', whether understood as an

> individual person or a group of people. It has to do with the process of overcoming alienation through identification and in solidarity with 'the other', thus making peace and restoring relationships.[16]

In the public realm the doctrine of reconciliation offers theological guidelines for the way ahead. These theological guidelines are committed, by the doctrine of reconciliation, to restoring broken relationships. The doctrine is centered on the cross where God's love was revealed in completeness, forgiveness was offered, abusive power was overcome by Christ's self-emptying, and humanity was restored to the possibility of relationship. In the humiliation and suffering of the cross, God revealed the way of reconciliation.[17] The work of the cross complete, what it achieved remains an open possibility for humanity, until they choose to participate in it. As participants in the work of the cross, Christians find themselves in a new relationship with God and called into new relationships with one another and with all the people of God's world. To shape their ethical living the Christian community turns to scripture, to the Christian tradition, to other denominations, to other religions, and to the world, in an attempt to inform an ethic to support engagement, conversion and the transformation of society.

The importance of ethical living is seen in Northern Ireland where the long journey of peace-building, developing trust and confidence, shaping political structures and making commitments or espousing values to inform the way ahead, stretches before us. The vision of what we would like to have and what we actually have are far from reconciled to one another and can only, as De Gruchy urges, be reconciled by ethical living.

> The gap between the vision of reconciliation and the realities of social and political life cannot be bridged by

> words alone, but only by words that take on flesh and concreteness.[18]

An ethic for engagement enables the Church to take on flesh, incarnating itself in the world, in the knowledge and confidence that what it does is biblically and theologically inspired and informed. From the doctrine of reconciliation churches take the commitment to restoring relationships; they recognise, however, that relationships do break down, trust is often broken and that journeying together is not always possible.

In the public realm, where private traditions of ethical decision-making encounter one another and may clash, a church committed to dialogue as a means to transformation, must acknowledge that excluding other faiths or ideologies is not a Christian option. Yet the churches may find themselves in dispute with others in the public realm for they offer a distinctive vision. Fergusson recognizes the results of embracing both distinctiveness and engagement. Thus,

> ...the church should seek to maintain its homogeneity as a moral community while acknowledging its stake in the peaceful maintenance of a pluralist society. It should expect to meet both the hostility and hospitality of alternative moral arguments since it offers a distinctive vision but one which is not lacking in connection with other convictions and aspirations.[19]

In times of confrontation and dispute, the potential for broken relationships is real. It must also be said that churches do not enter the public realm necessarily with the respect of others. In the secular world there are many stories of hurt and blame implicating the churches. In the pluralist world there are people of other faiths whose faith-tradition has experienced hurt from the Christian community. The views from outside the church will be matched by a plethora of negative views on

outsiders from within the church itself. Reconciliation in the public realm must, therefore, already be on the church's agenda as it seeks to restore broken relationships.

Theologically, then, the doctrine of reconciliation implies that an ethic for engagement must be intent not only on building relationships but also on restoring relationships. Rooted and open, the Church seeks to engage with the world, explaining itself, listening to others, growing in understanding of others and of itself, while contributing from its own tradition to the patterns of a vital society. An ethic for engagement provides the contours for the churches' hermeneutical task of being in the world. It must draw on conversion and the necessary commitment to dialogue through which conversion becomes a possibility; and it must seek reconciliation as support to the Christian commitment to restoring relationships through incarnational practice.

3. Dynamic identity: an ethic for conversion through engagement

3.1 The contours of an ethic for engagement

The conversion process, offering change to Church and world alike, is fraught with difficulty, for it is the call to leave behind every security that the Church has built for itself. It is the call to find a new security in the changing self-understanding that comes with threefold dialogical encounter: firstly, dialogical encounter with God to whom the Church owes its primary allegiance; secondly, dialogical encounter with other traditions and histories of the Church which share the journey as one, holy, catholic and apostolic church; thirdly, dialogical encounter with the world, created and sustained by God, and itself reflecting something of the goodness and beauty of the Creator.

An ethic that guides and sustains dialogical encounter will have a number of key facets, which will apply both to the

Church and to those whom the Church encounters, but for the purposes of this chapter, and indeed this thesis, the focus is on the Church. The ethic will include:

a) Respect for those who are different.

This involves accepting their freedom to make their own choices, which are sometimes different from the choices made by church members. The Church will make no attempt to dominate or manipulate those of difference into the same position and approach as itself. In Chapter Three, the dangers of a coercive exclusivism were discussed. Respect for others who are different is now, therefore, taken for granted as an imperative of Christian living.

b) Respect for the Church's own sense of chosenness and the truth.

Both *Vatican II* [20] and *The Westminster Confession* [21] affirm the Church's unique message and chosenness. It is, therefore, an ecumenical affirmation and the Church continues to affirm a sense of chosenness and uniqueness together with the uniqueness of its task. An ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda* must facilitate the Church's belief that some things at least are given to the Church by God and are not, therefore, to be negotiated, although certainly they are to be explained.

c) Inclusiveness.

Inclusiveness is an essential aspect of the commitment to conversion, which enables transformation. Through dialogue, experiences of deep change or conversion are then integrated into the life the church, or any other group engaged in the dialogue. In order that the process of transformation is as far-reaching as possible, dialogical encounter needs to be among as diverse a group of people as possible. From the perspective of the churches, engagement enables the churches to allow their words to take on flesh.

d) Commitment to change.

The commitment to change operates as a supporting element to the dialogical process which enables participants in the dialogue to engage as openly as possible. From the perspective of the churches, commitment to change is an expression of dynamic relationship with God, which invites the restoration of all broken relationships.

e) Affirmation of primary allegiance to God as a key element in dialogical encounter. It is this affirmation which brings the Christian faith into the public realm while rooted in its own tradition, and provides the necessary security of discernment and boundary setting to the process of change. So Christians are assured that engagement will not undermine their commitment, first and foremost, to God.

It is the interaction of these key elements which underpins an ethic for engagement in the public realm, an ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda.* The ethic is aimed at beginning in ecclesial co-existence but moving towards co-operation. Co-existence, while essentially dialogical, represents the pale end of the spectrum where there is little space for movement. It gives, sometimes necessarily, the space for people who are different from one another to live alongside one another. But it is less likely to lead to conversion than a co-operative approach. Co-operation affirms dialogue in difference and seeks paths out of any impasse. The ethic, which assists the Church in moving towards unity that the world may believe, has also to respect the dignity and integrity of difference inside the life of the Church. It must, therefore, answer the concern of many, particularly those from the conservative evangelical and fundamentalist traditions, that unity means weak compromise. The ethic needs to provide some way of acknowledging difference as legitimate and at the same time enabling those who are different to move forward together. This moving forward must be neither in the style of compromise nor of selling out to the lowest common

denominator. It must provide a framework for co-operation as well as co-existence.

Even if co-existence is all that can be achieved there is a need for commitment to one another in charity. In the following pages, an understanding of commitment to one another will be drawn from the field of ethics. To it will be added a philosophical discourse, to enable the recognition of commonality in a way which leaves room for distinctive traditions; and a theological discourse with the view to freeing the churches from the burden of finding agreement before dialogue can take place.

In developing these discourses it is my intention, firstly, to illustrate that engagement with those who are different, affirmed as essential to the process of conversion, does not mean a compromise of oneself or one's tradition. In my argument this engagement is dependent on the distinction between the 'concrete' and 'generalized' other made among those espousing a communicative ethic. Secondly, I aim to show how it is possible to engage with those with whom there is no agreement without loss of purity. Feminist critiques of a communicative ethic are employed to develop a fresh understanding of where commonality may be situated, particularly where prior agreement is impossible. Feminist critiques and insights are intentionally employed as the application of an ecumenical methodology which takes account of those who, even though they occupy the hermeneutical space, experience marginalization. These critiques therefore challenge and inform any ethic which reaches for inclusion. Hence, in relation to the concern of the churches that engagement will result in moral compromise, I will, thirdly, develop the idea of the 'eschatological reservation' in the work of the feminist theologian Sharon Welch. This theological insight, which acknowledges that perfection is not something to

be expected, lifts the burden of concern arising from the fact that perfect situations seldom occur; consequently, the Christian position is unlikely to be affirmed in the manner which the churches would like it to be. So I turn directly to the debate within the field of communicative ethics and seek an adequate understanding of the 'other' to enable a dialogue of integrity, which enables everyone to engage from within their own experience and tradition, to occur.

3.2 Encountering the other - committing to one another

I have argued, throughout this thesis, that engagement with those who are different is essential to the process of conversion. This commitment is expressed in PCI's Peace Vocation (See Appendix E – The Church's Peace Vocation):

> **WE BELIEVE** that the same evangelical faith in Jesus Christ, which emboldens us to pray to God as our heavenly Father, challenges us to develop radically new attitudes and relationships with our neighbours in Ireland.

One of the greatest concerns for the Church in engaging with those who are different – and this includes engagement between the churches which are deeply divided on some theological and ecclesiological matters - is that significant compromises will have to be made and the distinctiveness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will be blurred. This concern about compromise, which would discredit the Gospel and obscure allegiance to God, has sometimes held the churches back from significant engagement in the public realm. If, however, the churches could be assured that discrediting compromise need not be the outcome of engagement with those who are different, there is the possibility of creative and dynamic engagement, through which witness to the Gospel can be made. This will require that the churches understand themselves to be

seen, within the process of engagement, as they really are. Consequent upon this demand is the requirement that the churches are also prepared to encounter others as they truly are.

It is my opinion that the call to dialogical living is the call to see others as they are and, in seeing others, to respect, listen and speak to them. In dialogue each gives to the other and each receives from the other, and there is openness, through relationship, to the process of conversion that is at the core of Christian identity. Each of the partners in the dialogue comes to the discussion on equal terms. Their experiences, different though they may be, are affirmed as valid and so the discussion becomes one that occurs, not only between different contexts, but also between individuals and groups who have different experiences. Each enters into a dialogue with a world that is beyond their experience. This world beyond their experience is represented concretely in the other person.[22]

Commitment to one another, as a matter of respecting one another's traditions and experiences, is an essential component to an ethic for engagement. This includes respect for the Church's own sense of chosenness and the truth which it believes has been revealed in and through it, and for its primary allegiance to God. If any agreement or way of moving forward is to be attained then parties to the process of dialogue must be able to fully represent their tradition and experience, and express their allegiance, but they must equally permit the other parties to fully represent their traditions, experiences and allegiances. A failure of each to permit the others to fully represent their traditions and experiences results in the experience of not being recognized within the dialogical process. For some, the experience may be radical enough for them to understand themselves to have been rendered invisible. This sense of being rendered invisible has been expressed on the

basis of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, culture, and religion.

The tendency is to render invisible those groups with whom ways forward are most difficult to achieve, believing them to hold parties to a dialogue back from reaching agreement. This tendency to render invisible can issue in participants in public life demanding cohesiveness and being willing to achieve cohesiveness through the exclusion of others. Exclusion, as a technique to achieve cohesion, is in direct contravention of the dynamic of inclusion essential to the process of conversion. Exclusion also diminishes the ability of the churches to integrate experiences of conversion into their tradition, undermining commitment to change.

Respectful inclusion of others, as diverse a group of others as possible, is illustrated here using feminist critiques of communicative ethics, which takes, from Seyla Benhabib, the idea of a 'concrete' other to counterbalance Habermas's 'generalized' other. For this feminist critique, within the communicative ethic school of thinking, to function effectively there must be a distinction made between what Benhabib and others call the 'generalized' and the 'concrete' other.

> According to the standpoint of the 'generalized other', each individual is a moral person endowed with the same moral rights as ourselves; this moral person is also a reasoning and acting being, capable of a sense of justice, of formulating a vision of the other, and of engaging in activity to pursue the latter. The standpoint of the concrete other, by contrast, enjoins us to view every moral person as a unique individual, with a certain life history, disposition and endowment, as well as needs and limitations.[23]

Benhabib draws on Hannah Arendt's understanding of 'representative thinking'. For the notion of representative thinking to operate it is essential that there be a sense of the

other and a willingness to take the views, or perceived views, of the other into account. So Arendt writes:

> No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature's wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings.[24]

Benhabib argues that the concrete other requires enlarged thinking if the other in all his or her particularity is not to disappear into some universalized other. Benhabib is attempting, I think, to draw out to its fullest extent, what it means to respect the other. She is aiming to address the issue of particularity by drawing on the principle of respect for all. It is possible to universalize this principle. Pluralism and universalism are held together by this notion of the concrete other. Benhabib's position permits the kinds of discussion in which others are not only told that they are important and respected and that their experience is valid. They are shown this in every attempt to make them concrete by listening and learning of their lifeworld.

'Lifeworld' is a term used by Benhabib, and taken from the early phenomenologists, notably Alfred Schultz, to describe the individual's or group's particular experience. Their lifeworld is the world immediate to them. The term originated in Habermas as a way of describing opposition to attempts to colonize which come from outside the lifeworld. Welch and Benhabib have both developed their view from the perspective of women, both changing from and critiquing Habermas's communicative ethic for its failure to take account of critique from those who belong to the broader community. As groups, among them women, who have been oppressed, rendered invisible and cut out of the decision-making process come into the picture, things change and any ethic has to take account of these changes.[25] According to Benhabib, Habermas has

neglected to take this transformation into account and so, she argues, has ignored difference in male and female experience. He has failed to take into account power relations in the realm of the intimate. In the decision-making process, it follows that all others who may have been rendered invisible by the process should now also have a place. It is from the inclusion of these others that a community will be able to critique its own purposes.

If there is to be real and meaningful encounter, then, persisting with the idea of a generalized other is insufficient as it does not take sufficient account of particularity. It must be accepted that, whoever the other is, they have a particular history and story which is valid.[26] Affirming the validity of pluralism, by concretizing the other, also affirms the validity of one's own position without setting it in conflict with the other. Claim to privilege can be maintained without vilifying others and without triumphalism. This has obvious relevance and significance for the Church, which wants to hold firmly to uniqueness but is at the same time seeking to engage with those who are different.[27] If concrete others engage with one another, then each has to be taken seriously, providing an answer to the Church's concern to be acknowledged as a faith tradition. While providing space for faith traditions in this way there is, *mutatis mutandis*, a consequent challenge to the churches to encounter others in the public realm as concrete others also.

Benhabib's notion of the concrete other takes account of the variety of experience, and affirms the particularity of different traditions and experiences. The idea, therefore, reviews exclusion, the price sometimes paid to achieve cohesion.[28] The feminist perspective makes possible the inclusion of groups who have been oppressed and who have sought to have their stories heard. Viewing one another in this specific way, as having valid stories and perspectives, means truly encountering one another

and committing to one another, and supports the idea of engagement for the transformation of Church and world. But how is it possible to have anything in common with others who are so diverse and different?

3.3 Encountering diversity - finding commonality

In contexts, such as Northern Ireland, where a society is disunited and where a sense of common ground needs to be encouraged, there is, nonetheless, need to situate commonality. In situations of competition and conflict, situating commonality is particularly difficult given the memory of attempts in history to reach agreement or find enough common ground to enable competing groups to move forward together. The memory of such attempts in Northern Ireland is most often a memory of failure. Repeatedly, agreement cannot be reached; lasting peace has not been attained. Is the notion of commonality, therefore, redundant in an ethic for engagement? Or is engagement simply out of the question when there is no commonality or sustaining memory and experience of commonality?

I argue that commonality can be situated *in the process of engagement, rather than being a prerequisite for access to the process or the goal of that process.* In other words, where an inability to reach agreement persists some commonality may be found within the process of seeking agreement, and this commonality should be identified and applauded. This is illustrated by the tension between a 'communal'[29] and a 'communicative' ethic.[30] A communal ethic, as typified by the work of Alasdair MacIntyre,[31] requires cohesiveness within the ethical community before decision-making processes ever begin. Commonality is, therefore, situated in cohesiveness within the ethical community. A communicative ethic, on the other hand, as typified in the work of Jürgen Habermas, accepts that disparate

groups can come together in the process - commonality being found in the process itself.

Sharon Welch and Seyla Benhabib believe that communicative ethics has to be advanced against neo-Aristotelian communal ethics. Welch challenges the neo-Aristotelian espousal of a prerequisite for community cohesiveness, arguing for interaction between communities which need not cohere and may have different operating principles, norms and mores.[32] Communicative ethics accepts pluralism as a good in itself and pursues moral practice based on the participation of as many as possible in the discussion. Assuming cohesion, a communal ethic takes social responsibility as its guiding principle, thereby excluding those who are not part of the coherent group, and resists a truly dialogical and inclusive approach to ethical discernment, decision-making and living.

> Communicative ethics, on the other hand, avoids the dangers of isolation and self-justifying ethical systems by its involvement in political coalitions and its openness to political conflict.[33]

Benhabib also has difficulty with neo-Hegelians who resist universalizable principles. A valid communicative ethic requires a universalizable principle as a basis for commonality.[34] Benhabib therefore proposes her own universalizable principle, based in the conversation between those who are different from one another. With other neo-Aristotelians, Benhabib affirms plurality but is careful not to, at the same time, affirm exclusion:

> What I propose is a procedural reformulation of the universalizability principle along the model of a moral conversation in which the capacity to reverse perspectives, that is, the willingness to reason from the others' point of view, and the sensitivity to hear their voice, is paramount.[35]

In communicative ethics the process itself, as an open process, is universalizable, and the goal is consent, derived from the general interest that the dialogue uncovers from the engagement of as many as possible, including those who would traditionally have been excluded. Appendix G: *The Falls and Shankill Think Tanks*, offers an illustration, from the Northern Irish context, of how those traditionally excluded can be included. Public space, as the place where those who are affected by decision-making can have a say, is discursive space, occupied by as many groups as possible. In its commitment to discursive space, communicative ethics strives to hold together both individual freedom and the common good in its search for mutual agreement which takes account both of one's own needs and the needs of others. In affirming individual freedom, then, respect for those who are different, for the Church's own sense of chosenness and of the truth revealed in and through it, and loyalty to God as a paramount loyalty, are all possible. In affirming the common good, communicative ethics enables an ethic for engagement to be committed to inclusiveness and change.

Discursive space assists the process of change by facilitating restructuring through discussion.[36] The direction the restructuring takes is illustrated in what Habermas defines as 'communicative action.' For Habermas the discursive space is occupied by communities of moral subjects in dialogue with one another. In this dialogue the perspectives taken by the participants must reflect both their own point of view and also that of others. Others are taken account of through a process of empathy and this assists in deciding on a course of action that is just and fair for all. In this way action becomes communicative. Communicative action, therefore, is the action that results from public discourse, always in the direction of reaching

understanding, though not necessarily achieving success. Communicative action results,

> ... when actors are prepared to harmonize their plans of action through internal means, committing themselves to pursuing their goals only on the condition of agreement – one that already exists or one to be negotiated – about definitions of the situation and prospective outcomes.[37]

The process of engagement must result in a plan of action and a commitment to the consensus that the participants reached. But what if consensus can only be reached among some groups, thereby excluding others? Benhabib argues that the consensus sought in Habermas's discourse ethics should be replaced by reaching an agreement. The moral conversation is focussed not on an agreed outcome, but directly on communicating with those with whom agreement must finally be made. She sees no need to guarantee consensus, but focuses on the will and commitment to seek understanding and reach agreement through the process of an open-ended conversation.[38] Reflecting on the Northern Irish situation *The Faith and Politics Group,* who have been employed throughout this thesis as an ecumenical strand in theological thinking, express the challenge of finding agreement.

> The challenge is to seek ways to end the fear-threat relationship and create a common domain open to all, not directed and controlled by the demands, symbols and practices of any one group.[39]

Participants are thereby freed to discover commonality in the process. In the context of Northern Ireland, where consensus seems unlikely and where the spectre of an imposed resolution, pleasing only to some, hovers in the background, the process of reaching agreement through focussing on those with whom agreement must be reached, offers a viable alternative to

achieving consensus before forward steps can be taken. Agreements, however small, and understandings developed through the process of engagement can be accepted as steps on the way and give society the opportunity of 'something' rather than 'nothing'. These 'steps on the way' may be viewed as signs of growing respect, willingness to be inclusive, and preparedness to change. For the churches, it is important that the 'something' agreed is not at any price, specifically at the cost of their allegiance to God. Yet, the churches can lend their support to this view because of their commitment to continuing change and in the strong belief that what is more acceptable can still be achieved through continuing engagement. In this way, churches are able to connect what they do and what they are, permitting ecclesiology and ethics to dialogue with one another in ways which are transformative for the Church and enable its conversion. The Church returns, then, to the discursive space bringing with it integrated experiences of transformation which, in their turn, enable the transformation of others. The WCC's process on the linkage between ecclesiology and ethics has already been referred to Chapter Four, section 1.5, and is affirmed here as an important linkage for the authentic engagement of the churches in the public space and for the conversion of the churches.

> Christian ethical engagement is an expression of our deepest ecclesiological convictions, and our ecclesiology must be informed by our experience of ethical engagement, by our living out of the gospel in the complex situations of the world. For what we do follows from who we understand ourselves to be, and where we understand ourselves to be at home.[40]

The ongoing interplay between Church and world, the integration of learning and experience that arises from this interplay, and the continuing engagement with those with whom agreement has to be reached provide, therefore, the dynamic

context for conversion of Church and world. For, as the identity of the Church is provisional and ready to change, as faithfulness to God grows and loyalties are renegotiated, so too agreements on the political scene are to be viewed as steps on the way rather than as ends in themselves, involving those in the public realm in the ongoing process of engagement with one another. Benhabib's important contribution enables engagement with people who are different in a way which is both respectful of difference and open to change. Within her thinking there is a clear emphasis on provisionality, as the constant engagement involves moving, step by step, until some end may be achieved. Provisionality will be the theme of the following section which draws on theological discourse to permit the churches to accept the notion of provisional goals.

3.4 Encountering imperfection – enabling ethical engagement

To the churches, reaching agreement within the process through engaging with others who have their own traditions and experiences can appear to fall far short of an ideal situation. For parties to the process it can seem like selling out on their ultimate commitments, settling for less rather than holding out for more. If the only alternative to reaching agreement, when consensus cannot be achieved, is an externally imposed system then the ethical commitment to mutual respect may be lost. A commitment to reaching agreement may be the only way in divided and contested societies.

The goals reached by agreement should be viewed as transitional, as steps on the way to the greater goal of consensus. The possibility of consensus may emerge as people become truly present to one another in common commitment to the process of reaching agreement. Transitional goals can be viewed theologically through Sharon Welch's idea of the *eschatological*

reservation, taken from the work of Johannes Metz and his notion of the eschatological proviso. [41]

> The eschatological reservation is the reminder that all our works are partial. Though inspired and guided by God, they cannot be directly identified as the work of God nor identified as the Kingdom of God.[42]

Eschatology has been viewed as a drawing of history towards God's will and God's way and also as an interruption to history. No matter which view is taken, common to both is the understanding that the world in which we live is not perfect; it has a provisional quality to it. The impact here is to view history as unfinished, provisional, eschatologically reserved, and therefore always on the move towards something else. Any temptation for individuals or groups to remain as they are can be corrected by eschatology. Theologically speaking, the will to change expresses the eschatological reservation as the Church journeys towards perfection. Equally, disengagement from processes through which it is believed the highest goals cannot be achieved, is challenged by the eschatological reservation. To wait for the opportunity through which any group's highest goals will be quickly or easily reached, cannot be accepted as respectful engagement with others. Ecclesiologically speaking, acceptance of the eschatological reservation expresses the reality that changes have to be made in Christian living and in churches' relationships with one another. It, therefore, provides churches with occasion to examine their loyalties, renegotiate them where necessary, and continue in the process of conversion.

The eschatological reservation relativizes all loyalties. Only loyalty to God remains as that which is the unquestioned focus of Christian living. This focus on loyalty to God alone makes the will to change in Church and society possible, and provides a means by which the Church can be involved in what

might be termed 'provisional goals.' Commitment to one another, the acceptance of transitional goals, and seeking commonality within, rather than as a prerequisite to, engagement, provide the contours of an ethic for engagement. These three dynamics find theological guidance in Christian teaching about conversion and reconciliation. However, for some a number of concerns may persist regarding the risk of maintaining the distinctiveness of the Church in the cause of being respectful of others, thereby relativizing truth claims through the process of dialogue. These concerns will need to be addressed now and some indicators devised as to what may be required of the churches as a society seeks to move towards reconciliation.

4. Towards reconciliation: from disengaged concern to ethical living

4.1 A concern for distinctiveness

In the face of the call for commonality Fergusson puts the matter of distinctiveness pertinently and sharply:

> Christian witness in this social context bears the character not of seeking common ground with those who dwell *extra muros ecclesia*, but of articulating a vision that is distinctive and sometimes counter to the prevailing culture.[43]

Fergusson is arguing from the acknowledgement that in pluralist, secular societies there is no common agreement on what it means to be human, or on criteria to establish what it means to be human. At the same time as affirming the need for Christian ethics to be distinctively Christian, Fergusson also affirms that Christian communities should be engaged with the pluralist, secular world and so he argues for recognition of genuine, 'moral insight and practice outside the church.'[44] For Fergusson, there is common moral ground to be identified. In

his own words, he leaves open the possibility of human action outside the church being determined by God, arguing from a clearly Reformed perspective:

> I have argued for a neo-Barthianism in which the Christian life has a distinctive ethos on account of its understanding of human action as determined by the prior, ongoing, and future action of the triune God. This establishes a strong notion of Christian distinctiveness and gives high priority to the *polis* of the church which bears witness to the Spirit in manifold ways to the action of God. At the same time, such distinctiveness is derived from God primarily and acknowledged by the church secondarily , there is an open possibility of human action outside the church also being determined by God. [*sic*][45]

On this basis, Fergusson argues that it is possible to encounter God at work outside the church, while acknowledging the fact that there may be arguments made by the Christian community which others will find unpalatable,. In this he reflects Volf's argument that Christian identity involves a change of loyalty from a culture with its gods, to the 'God of all cultures'. As argued in Chapter Two, section 4.2, a Christian community which acknowledges God at work inside the life of the Church and in the life of the world owes steadfast loyalty to the God who transcends all cultures. With this understanding commonality is an open possibility but the distinctiveness of the Christian message is not compromised. This concern for distinctiveness is one expressed across the denominations and is articulated in the Roman Catholic tradition by Robert Gascoigne,[46] Professor at the Australian Catholic University. Gascoigne acknowledges similar concerns to Fergusson regarding the need to safeguard Christian distinctiveness:

> In appealing to what is held in common, Christians may be sacrificing what is distinctive in their own identity in favour of notions whose general acceptance is based

> more in their vacuity and banality than their universal transparency.[47]

Gascoigne also acknowledges that when Christians appeal to their own tradition they may be perceived in the public realm as another religious pressure group to which their listeners do not want to pay attention. Gascoigne seeks, therefore, to situate the church in the public realm, maintaining its distinctiveness while presenting its views in a manner to which others can pay attention, recognising the validity of the church's position. In this sense,

> [t]he question of the public role of Christian faith turns ... on the service its traditions of disclosure can give to a pluralist society – a society that may not, because of its own essential characteristics, give any particular religious tradition public pre-eminence or normative status.[48]

Gascoigne's view depends on his belief that individual freedom needs to be continually enriched from traditions of meaning. The Christian faith provides one of those traditions of meaning, enabling dialogue which depends on mutual respect and tolerance, willingness to recognise common and shared situations, and readiness to include all potential contributors.[49] If there is no recognition within a society of the traditions that shape its individuals then that society has an, 'impoverished notion of individual rights.'[50] The need for recognition of traditions and experiences, which influence those in the public realm, has already been argued in section 3.2 with regard to Benhabib's work concerning 'concrete' others. In that section it was affirmed that this enables the Church to be the Church and requires that churches permit others the same freedom.

One of the traditions that mould society's individuals is that of Christian revelation. Christian revelation affirms God's love for humanity and the world and also the value of each person as created and loved by God.[51] The result is that when,

> Christian revelation is characterized by a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity with other faiths and world-views, then communication of its meanings and values can take place in pluralist societies through the difficult but valuable process of dialogue, in an attempt to achieve shared insight into a common human condition.[52]

Gascoigne's emphasis on traditions of meaning, and Fergusson's recognition of God at work in human action outside the Church, provide for the concern about distinctiveness to be met without taking away from commonality which is discovered within the process of engagement. However, Gascoigne's emphasis on traditions of meaning, when taken alongside the emphasis on commitment to one another, may not alleviate the anxiety about relativizing the truth of the Christian message.

4.2 A concern about relativism

The concern about relativism, rightly expressed by members of the Church, is a concern that moral standards are defined by something other than the narratives and practices of the Church which are shaped by the interpretation of scripture. Definition of morality from outside the Church, without critical and relevant insight from the churches, would be considered to be a defaulting on truth and an assault on the authority of scripture. It is primarily the church's belief in the truth revealed by God authoritatively in scripture which shapes the lives of its members. As Fergusson argues, '[t]he kind of people Christians are called to be results in their behaving in particular ways.[53]

In the early church, the self-understanding of the Christian community as the community of disciples, 'called for their highest loyalty, even when this occasioned martyrdom.'[54] If those bringing the charge of relativism wish to keep the Church apart from the world as a means of preserving purity then it

would seem that liberal and pluralist societies are correct in their, 'widespread belief that the resources for a public ethics should exclude religious traditions.'[55] In this way revealed truth is excluded from public ethics both by liberal, pluralist societies and by the Church. Disengagement from the public realm may also be construed as defaulting on the, 'Calvinist propensity for resolute activity in the secular realm'.[56]

Gascoigne argues against the withdrawal of religious discourse from the public realm. He asserts that autonomy, such as that which the churches seek to maintain, cannot be divorced from an orientation towards truth. To do so would be to admit that autonomy is, in fact, the, 'acknowledgement that human beings have desires which they wish to satisfy and that they are incapable of reflecting on how to achieve that satisfaction.'[57] Autonomy oriented towards truth, is a position which can be taken by the churches against the charge of relativism. This position, relating autonomy and truth, can equally be taken by others in the public realm. The orientation towards truth, therefore, becomes a common movement among those engaged in the public realm. The result is that, '[i]f all participants in discourse are recognized as standing in relationship with truth, as subjects oriented to truth, then a radical equality is implied.'[58]

To those concerned about relativism, the acceptance of autonomous participants in the public realm, each oriented towards truth and recognising one another's orientation, may provide comfort. Without engagement, argues Gascoigne, epistemological crises have no hope of resolution for there is no recognition that one moral tradition may find answers or assistance in another.

> Thus the relativist charge that traditions are self-contained organisms which permit no interaction and no challenge by a reality which is other than themselves, applies only against those traditions that are not

> developed to the point where epistemological crises are a real possibility.[59]

To those concerned about relativism it may, therefore, be said that engagement does not preclude care for truth. Rather, churches retain their autonomy and orientation towards the truth of the gospel, as they engage with others. To persist with disengagement excludes the church from the call to cogent witness, particularly in situations where there is epistemological crisis. Further, disengagement may actually permit the propagation of untruth as each tradition remains self-contained. Engagement is, then, critical for any tradition in search of truth and seeking to share that truth. In the process of engagement, communication and a sense of community significantly sustain the churches, as they seek and share truth and look for the transformation of Church and society.

4.3 An appeal for communication and community

For the Christian community, cogent witness within the public realm is sustained by a sense of community: firstly, of their own tradition's community, and, secondly, by the community of all those engaged in the public realm. The building of community in the public realm is inevitably dependent on the willingness of different traditions to communicate with one another. Engagement, in terms of open communication about one's own tradition and listening to autonomous others, has become possible, and challenges the Christian community to get involved in the public realm, due to a shift within the field of ethical reasoning.

In the field of ethical reasoning two traditions have been predominant, both of which have brought their challenges to Christian communication with the world because neither of the predominating traditions took much account of the significance of ethical values derived from religious traditions. The natural

law tradition, while being integrated into Roman Catholic thought, is based in right reason as inherent in all human beings. The second tradition arises from the Kantian notion of the autonomy of ethics and is based on the universality of reason and freedom. Gascoigne argues that there has been a shift towards a new awareness that historical traditions, including that of Christian faith, shape perceptions, resulting in a new connection between religion and ethics. This shift in understanding has meant a redefinition of the public forum, has clear implications for experience, and is crucial for Christian communication. Gascoigne defines the challenges of this shift.

> If the public forum can no longer be defined as a place cleared of all particular traditions of belief and value, but rather as a place where such traditions meet in dialogue, then theology, the articulation of a specific faith tradition, can make its own contribution to the dialogue.[60]

It is possible, then, for the public forum to be a place where the Christian faith can be freely articulated and affirmed; however, what informs the Christian contribution may be neither understood nor thought relevant in the public forum, as, for example, the importance of scripture or revelation. Yet there is an opportunity to draw on the narrative resources of the tradition, setting the Christian vision in the public domain and contributing to ethical debate. For, as Gascoigne reminds us, '[a]ny conception of Christian identity must have communication at its core, in so far as all Christian identity is rooted in evangelization.[61]

The alternative, which seems to cut against the Christian tradition of mission and evangelism, is to retreat into the realm which is shared only with those who accept the same ethical implications. There is much at stake through engagement in the public realm not least,

> ...the possibility of achieving common insight in a cultural situation where it is recognized that such commonality must be based on an acceptance that meaning and value have their source in particular experiences mediated by traditions.[62]

Among the plurality of voices, then, the Christian tradition is articulated - the tradition of a community which finds its identity in belonging to God and measures its faithful expression of that belonging in consideration of other loyalties that may be demanded from it.

In his exploration and explication of scripture to understand belonging to the Christian community, Fergusson notes how the community of faith is bound together by its rituals and practices, specifically baptism and the Lord's Supper. The context for the early church's ethical practice, argues Fergusson, was developed and sustained through these communal rituals and practices. The desire to express belonging to God through ethical living also gave shape to the community. For example, he cites the taking up of the strong Jewish theme of hospitality as a means of underpinning the early Christian's choice to forge links with Christians in other parts of the world. This link with the Jewish tradition and with Christians in other places was crucial in shaping the Christian community; it was also an expression of the community's ethical commitments. This sense of being an engaged Christian community, engaged with other Christians, shapes Christian adventure into the public realm where, in communication with others, there may yet be more shaping to be received as the Church engages in the hermeneutical task of explicating the gospel in the world. The appeal for communication is an appeal to the evangelistic heart of the Church to share the good news. The appeal to community is a safeguard in the public realm as it invites Christians to engage firmly from within their own Christian

tradition. It is an appeal consonant with scripture for, '...it seems clear that the early Christians understood their lives to be shaped by their commitment to Christ and their belonging to the church.'[63]

But in the public realm, is there any chance of discovering or developing a common moral language through which the various traditions gathered there can communicate?

4.4 The search for a universal moral language in the language of human rights

Whether the church enters the public realm emphasising its distinctiveness or emphasising common ground or making cause with others, there needs to be a means of communication, a language that has enough common coinage to enable different traditions to make themselves understood to one another. Fergusson argues that, '[t]he language of rights is the only current candidate for a universal moral discourse.'[64]

Fergusson asks whether or not such a language can be appropriately adopted by the church and points to some of the difficulties of the language and use of the concept of human rights. In particular, he notes the dynamic towards the assertion of individual rights over community rights, which narrows the notion of rights and undermines its relational dimensions. Fergusson believes this approach to debase the whole notion of rights and, '[a]s it becomes increasingly debased, it functions as a means of asserting the interests of particular groups of individuals.'[65]

While Fergusson is right, in my view, to point to the dangers of asserting individual at the expense of communal rights, it is also important to note that communities are made up of individuals, with their own individual needs and concerns. The difficulties in the assertion of individual rights, Fergusson would argue, arise when that assertion reaches a level at which

all notions of individuals in relationship with one another are eroded. An emphasis on communal rights points to the need to develop an understanding of human rights which maintains relational responsibilities as crucial.

Gascoigne is helpful here in acknowledging the difficulties which arise when human rights language becomes a way to assert the interests of one group over another. If relational responsibilities are not taken seriously, then the result is that a crisis ensues in the possibility of human rights language assisting in the resolution of moral disagreements. Gascoigne places his concern about the language of human rights within a discussion about autonomy and obligations to community. He points to disagreements between liberal and Christian views of the individual, situating the tension with the Christian vision of individual life as a freedom-in-relationship.[66] Despite his concerns, Fergusson does not reject the language of human rights but argues for a resuscitation of the notion of human rights. He proposes using the language of rights but noting its limitations. His argument for resuscitation is based in the common moral ground which the language of human rights provides and argues that,

> [i]f it is possible to recognise common moral ground in the absence of common moral theory, it ought to be possible for Christian theology to appropriate for specific tasks the language of human rights.[67]

This common moral ground is evidenced in International Courts, such as the European Court of Human Rights, in the language of human rights increasingly used in inter-faith dialogue, in the ability of human rights language to articulate consensus against abuses, and in the support it has from a wide cross-section of populations. The language of human rights could, therefore, be developed to express the minimum requirements for belonging to moral community.

Agreement could be sought on the right not to be tortured or murdered, to a fair trial, to freedom of speech, to a share in material prosperity and participation in economic life, as a beginning. For both Fergusson and Gascoigne the resuscitation and use of the language of human rights is an attempt to engage in the public realm employing Christian discourse and communicating Christian meaning. Clearly,

> [i]f Christian action only makes sense on the basis of commitment to a particular community with its shared practices and narratives, it is hard to see on what basis moral appeal can be made to those who choose not to belong to that community.[68]

It is through engagement in the public realm, in ethical Christian living, and in dialogue with those whose views are different that the possibility of far-reaching reconciliation opens up for societies experiencing division and conflict. Without engagement there cannot be reconciliation, or what De Gruchy calls 'restored relationships'. De Gruchy's understanding of the meaning and practice of reconciliation is helpful, providing a vision of ways in which churches can enter into public debate and action, in situations where there is competition and conflict.

4.5 Reconciliation as a way of engaging in the public realm

In Northern Ireland, where society is engaged in a process of building peace, there is a significant question for the churches about how they can engage in the public realm in a manner that is authentically Christian, arising from Christian beliefs, and also contributes to the process of building peace. In section 2.2, I argued that conversion is closely allied to the Christian doctrine of reconciliation, and in section 2.1 that conversion occurs through engagement with those who are different. As conversion has constantly been affirmed, throughout this thesis, as central to Christian identity, Christian

ethical living cannot be detached from the doctrine of reconciliation. In this section, I will examine the doctrine of reconciliation in relation to Christian ethical living, drawing on De Gruchy's development of the doctrine in relation to his experience in South Africa, providing a model for some ways in which the Church can reflect on its engagement in the public realm. In his reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa, De Gruchy argues that,

> [r]econciliation, …, is a human and social process that requires theological explanation, and a theological concept seeking human and social embodiment.[69]

Reconciliation is, therefore, at the interface between Church and society. At this interface reconciliation looks both ways. On the one hand, it looks to the Church for prayer arising from encounter with God through repentance and faith, and, on the other hand, it looks to the world in which it must be actively, 'engaged at the heart of the struggle for justice and peace.'[70]

One significant, active role which churches can play as a society attempts to move towards reconciliation is in the creation of space in which people can be reconciled or begin the process towards reconciliation. In the South African context, the Truth and Reconciliation process assisted in the provision of space in which people could begin to be reconciled to one another - and it was a process in which the churches were involved. The space created was one for encounter with others, since,

> … reconciliation cannot be pursued without the alienated parties facing one another. For only then can they speak to, and hopefully hear each other. What happens in that space between them then becomes the critical issue.[71]

In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation process was established as a means of dealing with the past and moving into the future together. In Northern Ireland acceptance of the possibility of any similar process has been complicated by the release of prisoners prior to such a process. This undermined the notion of and motivation for truth-telling. It was also undermined by a significant number of calls for inquiries into crimes of the past with particularly political overtones. Consideration of these matters falls, in Irish Presbyterianism, to the Church and Society Committee (renamed as such in 2005, previously being known as the Church and Government Committee), and provides a case study for consideration of the possibilities and constraints faced by the churches in divided societies. Between meetings of the General Assembly the Committee reports to the General Board regularly, the General Board being the most representative body of the PCI after the General Assembly. In February 2004 the committee reported to the General Board.

> PCI has been consistently cautious about the idea of a South African style Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The two situations are not the same. The South African model benefited from being able to gain testimony from those responsible for crimes in return for amnesty. With the early release of prisoners, there is no incentive to give account of past deeds. Perhaps what we ought to be looking for in this is not so much 'truth' as 'meaning'. The goals of justice might, at least in part, be better approached through healing processes rather than judicial processes.[72]

It has, therefore, to be acknowledged that practical ideas are not easily transposable from one context to another, although learning and challenge may be usefully shared. The Church and Society committee continues to believe that Northern Irish society is not yet ready to move to the critical

stage of a Truth and Reconciliation style process. However, the General Assembly has proposed another type of process:

> ... recognising the need for victims to find healing and closure, yet conscious of the debilitating effect on society of yet more inquiries, call for the establishment of a dedicated forum where victims can tell their stories and their personal experiences be placed on official public record.[73]

As an initiative of his Moderatorial year, June 2005-June 2006, the Right Rev. Dr. Harry Uprichard has invited those who have been victims of the Troubles who are Presbyterians living within the Presbyteries of Armagh, Newry and Tyrone, to meet with him. Victims will be free to bring to these meetings any issue which arises for them. It remains to be seen whether this becomes part of a wider process within PCI or indeed within the wider society.

While the Moderator's initiative cannot be defined as a reconciliation process in the sense in which De Gruchy would define it, it may be looked upon as a pre-reconciliation process or as making a contribution to a process of reconciliation. It has a two-fold value: firstly, in giving victims the opportunity to be heard; secondly, giving representatives of PCI better insight into the experiences and feelings of victims, which in turn shapes the contribution which representatives make into the wider public debate. In the movement towards reconciliation, however, a broader, more inclusive vision must be upheld,

> [r[econciliation is about building bridges, about allowing conflicting stories to interact in ways that evoke respect, build relationships and help restructure power relations.[74]

Processes that support movement towards reconciliation are to be welcomed. However, the greater vision of commitment to one another, acceptance of provisional goals

and of seeking commonality through the process of engagement, remains the informing and challenging ethic for the churches as they engage in the public realm, seek their own conversion and the conversion of others, and contribute to the transformation of society. In Northern Ireland, this transformation is from a contested to a reconciled society. In the process of engagement, *ecclesia semper reformanda* becomes the vision of the Church living out and constantly renegotiating its loyalty to God.

5. Ecclesia semper reformanda: inhabiting one another's worlds

5.1 Symbolising the ethic for engagement

A useful symbolising of the ethic is found in the idea of 'inhabiting one another's worlds.' Here I draw on Robert McAfee Brown's reflections on Elie Wiesel's struggle to share his experience of Nazi concentration camps. Story telling is one means of inhabiting one another's worlds, but it is the symbol itself that has value for an ethic of engagement.

When Elie Wiesel was liberated from Auschwitz he went to live in Paris and there he chose not to speak of his experience for ten years. Wiesel came to believe that failure to speak leaves open the risk that the Shoah, or something like it, could happen again. While acknowledging the difficulties of story-telling[75] McAfee Brown concludes that the telling of the story permits the inhabiting of worlds not otherwise known. In listening to the storyteller, the world of the people whose story is told becomes accessible, although not entirely known, to the listener. It permits the listener to inhabit the world, in this case of the people who found themselves in the concentration camps.

> The story teller creates a bridge between two worlds. His story brings us into contact with a world to which access is otherwise denied us. And this is no more than a

> recapitulation of his own experience, for just as we receive from another, so does he.[76]

It seems to me that this metaphor of 'inhabiting the world' of others is an appropriate symbolising of an ecumenical ethic for engagement by the churches in the public realm. In seeking to inhabit the world of other groups the Church both offers others the opportunity to understand the gospel, while itself seeking a new and fuller understanding of others. In the willingness to listen, the Church permits others to inhabit the world of the Church, as it takes up its position in the public realm and inhabits other worlds. The Church continues to believe that when the gospel inhabits the world dynamics are changed. The power bases are challenged; the hopelessness is heard and taken on board; the anonymous world, of which the Church often despairs, becomes a community of persons like the Church.

In a disunited society, characterised by competition and contention, the symbol of inhabiting one another's' worlds provides a model for the Church's effective and distinctive witness. Theologically, it can be approached by recalling the Incarnation: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us.'[77]

Christ's incarnation was to change the dynamics of history forever. If Christian communities are to contribute to changing the dynamics of a society, then they must be incarnate in their context, willing to inhabit other worlds. The Church inhabits the world and the world inhabits the Church. The place of meeting is the place of Christ's incarnation.

5.2 Sustaining the Church in an ethic of inhabiting other worlds

What sustains the Church to be able to continue to inhabit other worlds and allow other worlds to inhabit the world of the Church? When results are not instant, there is a tendency

to cynicism and despair. Memories of previous failure can consolidate the cynicism and maintain the *status quo*. In Northern Ireland, memory plays an important role in causing different sections of the community to remain unchanged. *The Faith and Politics Group* indicate how the churches have contributed to sustaining memory to support the *status quo* of division and separation in Northern Ireland:

> The churches in Ireland have carried memories of community experience and given it meaning. They have helped to maintain memories – memories of fear, grievance, antagonism and anxiety. They have assisted us in naming our enemies and told us why they are enemies.[78]

Yet, it is to memory that Welch, and others, suggest that the Church must return to be sustained. Welch, drawing on Johannes Metz, advocates dangerous memory[79] as a means to sustain hope. Dangerous memory affirms God at work in history, and therefore in histories other than our own. God sustains hope, the hope that God is still at work in and through every situation. It is a means of affirming the dignity of all experience. When the dangerous memory of the gospel, which calls the Church to love of God and love of neighbour, encounters the remembering of history that demonizes others, then hatred and violence can be transformed to the same humility which took Christ to the cross. Vulnerability, openness, repentance and forgiveness replace autocratic self-justification. Hearing and accepting criticism of one's own position and permitting a new truth to come to bear on remembering, is the beginning of respect for the dignity of another story and experience.

The dangerous memory of a gospel that declares God's will for salvation, worked out in an incarnate Saviour, reminds the Church that if it is the salvation of the world which is its

goal, then it too must be incarnate, encountering the reality of the others who feature in the churches' lifeworld as the 'outsiders', the ones who are different. Love of the other provides, in part, the matrix for change. That matrix also comes from love of oneself, not from giving up the validity of one's own story. Love of oneself and love of the other are essential in the matrix for change. It is, therefore, a matrix that takes everyone seriously and provides the opportunity to move beyond arrogance and triumphalism.

5.3 Applying the ethic in Northern Ireland

The ecumenical ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda* has no place for arrogance. In Northern Ireland, where violence has been the norm for a generation and more, arrogance has been expressed politically in the condemnation or maligning of others.[80] On the streets, arrogance was expressed, and continues to be expressed, in the marking of territory,[81] in acts of violence perpetrated to keep one's own part of the community in line and also in acts of violence against the enemy. To move away from arrogance is to take account of the other to the extent that acts of violence are no longer necessary. As *The Faith and Politics Group* recognize, moves away from arrogance assist a community to break the cycle of violence:

> The cycle of violence cannot be broken by talking down to people, but if a real dialogue can be initiated then people can become open to the Spirit. [82]

Suspicion of one another contributes to arrogance and separation.[83] Finding commonality in the process, which is only possible when the other's position is respected, assists the move from suspicion to trust. As Pauline Coll, a Roman Catholic from Northern Ireland and member of an inter-denominational community group, writes:

> Trust cannot be fabricated. It is an arduous process which involves meeting, getting to know, learning to accept and then building that trust which is the foundation of a shared future.[84]

Churches everywhere are called to bear witness in their own context. History has repeatedly challenged the Church to struggle with the very real issues of life and death, murder and destruction, wells of bitterness and grief. The variety of ethnic conflicts, referred to in Chapter Two, represent situation after situation where effective witness is starkly called for. This is no less true in Northern Ireland. At the present juncture in Northern Ireland's history there is hope that violence will not resume. A lasting political settlement is still only anticipated with considerable reservation. Yet, perhaps for the first time, we in Northern Ireland can see the clash as being between, what John Darby calls, a culture of violence and a culture of co-existence.

> Many people think of the Northern Ireland conflict as a conflict between two cultures – unionism and nationalism or, more often, Protestant against Catholic. A stronger case can be made that the central cultural division, especially since the declaration of the 1994 ceasefires, is between a culture of violence and a culture of co-existence. The result of the interplay between these two tensions ultimately determines whether any peace process succeeds or fails.[85]

If these are genuinely the choices before the people of Northern Ireland, then the Church is called to declare itself in support of a culture of co-existence, moving towards co-operation and reconciliation. If God is found among every nation and people, and if God is the God of their histories, then the Church's loyalty to God above all other loyalties, is to be demonstrated in co-existence at the very least, and co-operation more especially, and where possible. A verbal commitment is not enough. Churches must represent what they believe.

Appendix H, *The Lower Antrim Clergy Group* offers one model, from Northern Ireland, of how churches can represent what they believe, in their lifestyle. In Northern Ireland there is much that has been done in terms of ecumenical co-operation, but much more remains to be done in a place where so many, 'live among our ramparts and fortifications – our 'peace' lines. Christians have a particular responsibility to act in this situation.'[86]

An ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda* enables the churches to hold to greater goals by accepting provisional goals in the light of the eschatological reservation. The ethic assists the Church in a dialogical model for living by inviting groups to relate to one another as 'concrete others', recognizing their particularity. Relating to others in this way also permits the Church to retain commitment to the uniqueness of the Christian message and to speak that commitment when it is appropriate to do so.

Evangelicals might well raise the question of truth here, seeing commitment to commonality in the process of engagement as a compromise of truth. Those who feel truth is on their side may not want to seek a future with those they believe to have gone astray. Evangelical approaches, such as this, are judged by the reality of incarnation, conversion to God as involving a turning towards one another, and by commitment to the belief that God, to whom the Church seeks to be converted, can be found among every kind of people.

5.4 A model from a local community

The Church remains strong in Northern Ireland. Few congregations have to face serious financial difficulty or the possibility of closure. But full pews and full coffers should not detract from the urgency of considering how to be the Church in a fragmented and confused world. The missionary task is as

clear as ever; the means to fulfill the task is less clear. Identity in conversion, an ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda*, goes some way to identifying how the missionary task can be fulfilled in a world where there is crisis and a real need for conversion.

Local congregations are encouraged, in this model, to take their place within the broader community context. They should take that place with confidence in the message of the gospel and make no apology for their commitment to the gospel. Congregations should view other participants in community life as having significant and important things to say. When the community comes together in mutual respect, then there is mutual sharing and mutual learning, for each group encounters the people who make up the community in different ways, and can add new dimensions to the encounter of the churches. In living an ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda* the Church can also help provide the community with an alternative model for living with difference, a model dependent on engagement and not domination.

In the congregation where I work, local community involvement began in a 'community consultation' in which different groups within the community were invited to come to the church on a Sunday morning and share something of who they are, what they do and what they have learned about the broader community. We also asked the participants to reflect on how a local Christian community could contribute to their work. One of the contributions which the congregation was encouraged to make, and subsequently has made, was in the sharing of our under-used building. While this has not been without its challenges, the development of the building as safe, shared space, where open encounter between many difference groups is possible, is now established practice. (A full account of this process is found in Appendix I, *A view from a local congregation*)

Congregations have traditionally been involved in the education system by holding seats on local school Boards of Governors. This could be broadened in ways, particular to the situations in which congregations find themselves, for example, through involvement in Community Police Liaison Committees and District Policing Partnerships, Community Councils, Health Trusts, etc. The opportunities for places in which to engage with those who are different are perhaps much greater than any local congregation can fulfill. The challenge is to adapt congregational life and transform Christian understanding of what it means to be a community bearing witness to the Gospel, to the point where as much as possible is given to the process of engagement while still maintaining the congregation's own internal life. What is at stake is the conversion of the churches to greater loyalty to God and the effective call to others to choose that same loyalty.

6. Conclusion: from arrogance to dialogue

A sense of urgency prevails in Church circles as to how to effectively bear witness to the distinctive message of the gospel. It was expressed by Presbyterians in 1990, in the Coleraine Declaration (See Appendix A – *The Coleraine Declaration*):

> We believe that amid conflicting cultures God is willing us to create a distinctively Christian counter-culture, in which we distance ourselves from the kind of Protestantism which closely identifies the reformed faith with particular political and cultural aspirations.[87]

In Northern Ireland the sense of urgency is compounded by an elongated peace process, and a persisting disunity in society that appears unable to overcome difficulties and resolve difference. A Church, living in the light of the eschatological reservation, can contribute to the process of

making peace by affirming the significance of reaching agreement (as opposed to consensus) and emphasizing the importance of every person in the decision-making process and in the potential validity of their positions.

The Church engages as the Church, taking its stand on the gospel message, and seeking no apology from others as to its commitment. But it is not enough for the Church to apply its views to others if it does not apply them to itself. Local church communities need, therefore, to find ways to apply the ethic, *ecclesia semper reformanda*, in their own situation. Congregations can thus both offer and model alternative ways of living with difference.

The alternative model is found in an ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda,* conversion to God, by dialogically living all relationships. The ethic based in *ecclesia semper reformanda*, moves the churches from arrogance to engagement, bearing distinctive and effective witness. The ethic for engagement, which informs the churches in their ethical living, relies on a commitment to one another among participants in public life, an agreement to seek commonality within the process of engagement which enables participants to recognise one another's traditions and experiences, and an acceptance of provisional goals while reaching, through engagement, for greater goals.

Finally, it has to be acknowledged that there is also a significant and unavoidable challenge to the institutional Church in its denominational structures. Within denominations there is the challenge to recognise differences that exist and their own historical dynamics which may have become concealed and forgotten. Between denominations there is the challenge to engage with one another and to find ways, formally as well as informally, to engage in the public realm. Without such engagement, at every level, the possibility of conversion is

limited and the church fails to be *semper reformanda*, acknowledging transitional goals and assisting society in the movement towards reconciliation. In Northern Ireland, the churches, adopting an ethic for engagement, can find themselves building peace, bearing witness to God's love and justice, and experiencing conversion in loyalty to God which is above all other loyalties. The urgency of the task and the necessity of conversion and transformation have been illustrated in the Faith and Order Commission's Plenary Meeting, 2005. The summation of the dilemma of human conflict which is offered to us in the record of that meeting should impress on churches everywhere, the need to engage meaningfully in the public realm in ways which do not reflect the divisions and conflicts of the societies in which those churches find themselves:

> Despite our great intellectual, cultural and technological progress the 20th century – in conjunction with the opening years of the 21st century – has proven simultaneously to be the most violent and brutal age, in terms of victims of armed conflicts, in the history of humanity. Wars, of course, affect the whole fabric of society and cause irreparable physical and emotional damage. What is most shocking about these conflicts, however, is that it is not the soldiers or warriors who become the main victims; it is rather the most fragile sectors of society –children and women – who are rendered the chief sufferers.[88]

[1] Influences can be theological, biblical, denominational, social, economic, contextual, or a wide variety of other individual experiences and views of the world.

[2] 'As a result of the historical separation of church and state in Western European and North American countries, and as a consequence of developments in modern philosophy and science, matters of ultimate faith concerning the meaning of life, of the highest good, of the most binding principles in accordance with which we should conduct our lives, come to be viewed as rationally 'irresolvable' and as issues about which individuals themselves should decide according to the dictates of their own consciences and world-views.' Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992) p109. Benhabib indicates that in Western European and North American countries privacy rights take precedence leading to confusion in the public sphere. These privacy rights are seen in the separation of church and state but also include the economic sphere and the sphere of what can be defined as the 'intimate.' e.g. household arrangements, daily need, sexuality, reproduction, care of the young and the sick etc.

[3] David Fergusson, *Community, liberalism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p48.

[4] Donald W. Shriver Jr., *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (Oxford: University Press, 1995) p66.

[5] Any attempt to represent the issue of identity symbolically is, of course, flawed and limited. However, there is value in trying to symbolize what is complex and often confusing. In relation to identity any symbol must indicate the many influences which shape and form individuals or groups. A grid is one symbol that indicates the multifaceted dimensions of identity. There are many individual sections in a grid, each section attached, in one way or another, to other sections and accommodating the addition of new sections. These new sections represent new discoveries about identity or new experiences. A grid, while being a useful image of the many aspects that go to make up the whole, has no symbolic representation of a centre, core or hub. A spider's web, on the other hand, has a hub around which every thread is woven. The hub gives structure to the web as the spider takes each silken thread through the hub or circles it around the hub. For the Christian, the hub around which life circles is that of conversion to God. When viewed in this way identity with its core as conversion can be symbolically represented as a spider's web. Having a clear centre with which all the threads that make up the web have connection, identity, viewed in this way, has a definite centre. Christianity places at the centre of a spider's web of identity, conversion to God. Consequently, choices and decisions regarding how life is to be lived are to be woven around this core.

[6] 'In order for his conversion to be complete, it was necessary that Paul accept that what happened to him was true, confess it publicly, and live it out as an apostle of the church. Otherwise the experience would remain on the periphery of his life – dramatic but not life changing.' Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1999) p93.

[7] Ibid. p101

[8] *The Westminster Confession of Faith (*Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons Ltd., 1979) Chapter XIII, Paragraph I.

[9] 'It can be said that the Decree on Ecumenism is permeated by the spirit of conversion. In the Document, ecumenical dialogue takes on a specific characteristic; it becomes a 'dialogue of conversion' …' *Ut Unum Sint: Encyclical Letter Of The Holy Father John Paul II On Commitment To Ecumenism (*London: Catholic Truth Society, 1995) p41

[10] Ibid. p20f
[11] David Fergusson, *Community, liberalism and Christian Ethics,* p155.
[12] '... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.' 2 Corinthians 5 v19.
[13] John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002) p46.
[14] Ibid. p49.
[15] Matthew 6 v12.
[16] Ibid. p51.
[17] 'The humble self-emptying of God in Christ, and the humiliation and suffering of Christ as our representative on the cross at the hands of political and religious power, was God's chosen way of achieving reconciliation.' Ibid. p70.
[18] Ibid. p75.
[19] David Fergusson, *Community, liberalism and Christian Ethics,* p172f.
[20] 'The one mediator, Christ, established and constantly sustains here on earth his holy church the community of faith, hope, and charity, as a visible structure through which he communicates truth and grace to everyone. But, the society equipped with hierarchical structures and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly church and the church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realties. On the contrary, they form one complex reality comprising a human and divine element. For this reason the church is compared, in no mean analogy, to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature, inseparably united to him, serves the divine Word as a living instrument of salvation, so, in somewhat similar fashion, does the social structure of the church serve the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body (See Eph 4:16).' 'Lumen Gentium', Chapter 1a Paragraph 8, Austin Flannery ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1995) p9.
[21] 'Unto this catholick visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.' *The Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter XXV, Paragraph 3.
[22] Writing of Hannah Arendt's work, Margaret Canovan indicates how essential the other person is:
'Only the experience of sharing a common human world with others who look at it from different perspectives can enable us to see reality in the round and to develop a shared common sense. Without it, we are driven back on our own subjective experience, in which only our feeling, wants, and desires have reality.' Margaret Canovan, 'Introduction', Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1958) pxiii
[23] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* p10.
[24] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p22.
[25] '... with the emergence of autonomous women's movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with women's massive entry into the labor force in this century, and their gain of the right to vote, this picture has been transformed.' Seyla *Benhabib, Situating the Self Ethics,* p109.
[26] 'We need to tell our stories to each other and listen intently to what we are told – which involves reaching beyond the words – feeling the pain of the other as transmitted through the 'memory' of their community. Thus, we begin to see from the perspective of the other.' An Interchurch Group

on Faith and Politics, *Remembrance and Forgetting: Building a Future for Northern Ireland* (Belfast: The Faith and Politics Group, 1998) p25.

[27] 'Reconciliation in Christ is about being freed from anxiety about our identity. 'If we are in Christ we are a new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17). The Christian community is not built up and united by opposition to an external enemy. Instead, being in Christ, following Him, allows a different world, a peaceable Kingdom, to come into being. It is a space in which we can recognize and receive the other, and be recognized and received by them.' An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Doing Unto Others: Parity of esteem in a contested space* (Belfast: The Faith and Politics Group, 1997) Section on The Christian Community.

[28] Welch echoes Benhabib's belief that it is particular people in particular situations who are to be encountered in dialogue. 'Moral reasoning cannot be carried out by one theorist but requires dialogue with actual members of different communities.' Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) p128.

[29] A communal ethic is represented by the work of Alasdair MacIntyre who came to view as 'moral calamity' the rejection in modern societies of appeal to common moral criteria as essential in shaping moral community and making moral judgements. Critical of Marxism, MacIntyre concluded that much of the ethos of the modern world has to be rejected as morally defective. His ethical framework centres on three virtues (p273): Virtues as qualities necessary to achieve the goods internal to practices; virtues as qualities contributing to the good of a whole life; virtues as qualities related to the pursuit of a good for human beings. He begins purposely in practices for it is there that the virtues have to prove themselves. MacIntyre has been criticized for making inadequate connections between Aristotelian moral philosophy and biblical theology. He acknowledges this and therefore states that his work should be viewed as still in process, unfinished, requiring additions and amendments: 'Any reconciliation of biblical theology and Aristotelianism would have to sustain a defense of the thesis that only a life constituted in key part by obedience to law could be such as to exhibit fully those virtues without which human beings cannot achieve their *telos*. Any justified rejection of such a reconciliation would have to give reasons for denying this thesis.' Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue (*London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1981) p278.

[30] Discourse or communicative ethics, which Benhabib and Welch espouse as a starting point, is a school of thought standing in the Kantian tradition. It is represented in the work of Jürgen Habermas. Reason is crucial in his thinking and Habermas seeks to use reason arising not from a legislative but from an interactive process. In this interactive process it is important that the participants in the dialogue reach towards consent. What is consented to is what is just. What is just is decided through the interactive process.

[31] One could also include, as representative of a communal ethic, Hans-Georg Gadamer and, significantly, the theologian, Stanley Hauerwas.

[32] It is this difference which Welch believes to be essential as a foundation for moral critique: 'I argue that the 'moral calamity' of our day lies not in the lack of shared moral criteria but in the inability of most communities to engender or accept a thorough critique of their 'own purposes' and their 'terms' of implementing those purposes.' Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk,* p125. I would agree with Welch and Benhabib that some neo-Aristotelian approaches tend towards exclusivism. Even in Aristotle's day the discussion was limited only to the community of free men which meant that there was little chance of a critique of any attempt to explain away the oppression of slaves or women. In the same way, if the ethic must arise out of cohesive community there is limited opportunity for

critique for there will be groups that are automatically, and perhaps imperceptibly, excluded.

[33] Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk,* p126.

[34] 'Universality is not the ideal consensus of fictitiously defined selves, but the concrete process in politics and morals of the struggle of concrete, embodied selves, striving for autonomy. ... interactive universalism regards difference as a starting point for reflection and action.' Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self,* p153.

[35] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. p8

[36] Developing a communicative ethic, Habermas attempts to explicate a moral point of view that can function in a situation where there are competing claims. He believes, like Kant, that this process has universal significance and is normative and binding. He thus takes account of the fact that particularities of group or individual experience do not permit a general theory, as particularities hold out against and deny common rootedness. The pluralist world does not allow a general theory, but does permit a universal moral viewpoint when that viewpoint is a means of adjudicating competing claims and interests. Habermas' discourse ethics replaces Kant's categorical imperative with a moral programme for agreement between those involved in the discussion. 'The central principle is that for a norm to be valid, its consequences for the satisfaction of everyone's interests must be acceptable to all as participants in a practical discourse.' Thomas McCarthy, 'Introduction', *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Jürgen Habermas, trans. Christian Lenhardt & Sherry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) pviii. Habermas sees a failure in Kantian ethics in that it has failed to establish a morality free of metaphysical and religious assumptions. This is what has led him to discourse or communicative ethics. His discourse ethics is based in two assumptions, by which it stands or falls.

'Discourse ethics, then, stands or falls with two assumptions: (a) that normative claims to validity have cognitive meaning and can be treated *like* claims to truth and (b) that the justification of norms and commands requires that a real discourse be carried out and thus cannot occur in a strictly monological form, i.e., in the form of a hypothetical process of argumentation occurring in the individual mind.' Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* p68. Habermas moves away from the Kantian emphasis on individual consciousness to a community dimension.

[37] Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action,* p134.

[38] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self,* p9.

[39] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Doing Unto Others: Parity of Esteem in a Contested Space,* Section on developing a peace process. The Parades issue illustrates the difficulties of finding a common domain. Repeated calls from Nationalist/Republican Residents' Groups for dialogue on parade routes have been resisted by the Loyal Orders. The Orders seem convinced that entering a common domain would have no benefit for them and indeed when attempts have been made, through proximity talks, they have decried the process as useless. One can only assume that is because they did not get what they wanted. Equally, the Residents' Groups have appeared unwilling to respect the moves already made by the Loyal Orders who, on occasion, have limited their symbolic displays, restricted the tunes bands play and walked early enough in the day, they believe, to cause little offense. Each has sought, it seems to me, to control the other. There is no cohesiveness to the community and only an ethic committed to reaching agreement will have any success. At least in that commitment there may be a chance: 'We know that the other party

to any relationship also has interests, interests that may differ from ours. And as we try to deal with our differing interests, we will discover that we have different perceptions and values. As time passes and as we learn more, the interests, perceptions, and values of both sides are likely to change. These differing wants, perceptions, and values, and the changes in them that take place over time, provides the endless grist for every relationship.' Roger Fischer & Scott Brown, *Getting Together: Building Relationships as we Negotiate* (London: Penguin Books, 1989) p8.

[40] Thomas F. Best & Martin Robra eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement And the Nature of the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997) pix.

[41] Metz's influence is obvious in the reference to 'eschatological proviso.' The eschatological promises of freedom, peace, justice and reconciliation cannot be achieved in and identified with any particular social situation. They remain promises for the world to come. For Metz, the proviso serves as a corrective to any foolhardy or narrow commitment to political parties or programmes. In fact, to be committed to one, as opposed to another, as providing the way is idolatrous, in the same way as choosing one ethnic identity over another can become idolatrous. Metz thus seeks to relativize political situations and arrangements. For more on this see, Johannes Metz, *Theology of the World*, trans, William Glen (New York: Seaburg Press, 1969) pp153ff. In this Welch draws on Metz's eschatological proviso. Welch argues that this eschatological reservation has inevitable consequences for how we live our lives. She uses the idea to express the fact that our human actions cannot always be expected to be perfect, indeed the consequences of what we do cannot always be foreseen. The choices people make are based in a view from their own perspective. This is inevitable given that we are human beings limited in time, space and by our own experience. Welch is using the idea to question how it is that human beings can be sustained in striving for perfection while at the same time being fully aware that they cannot be perfect this side of the eschaton. An ethic based in eschatological reservation is an ethic that saves us from despair and sustains the human community to keep on trying and choosing and dealing with mistakes. It is from this understanding that Welch develops her ethic of risk.

[42] Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk,* p106.

[43] David Fergusson, *Community, liberalism and Christian Ethics,* p1f.

[44] Ibid. p2.

[45] Ibid. p162.

[46] Fergusson and Gascoigne have both contributed to the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, which aims to show the relevance of Christian ethics in the secular ethical debate.

[47] Robert Gascoigne, *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p1.

[48] Ibid. p23.

[49] Ibid. p23.

[50] Ibid. p20.

[51] 'Revelation discloses the love of God for humanity and the cosmos in the person of Jesus, and at the same time discloses to human persons their transcendent worth as creatures loved by God.' Ibid. p22

[52] Ibid. p24

[53] David Fergusson, *Community, liberalism and Christian Ethics,* p12

[54] Ibid. p13

[55] Robert Gascoigne, *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics,* p45

[56] Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 1993) p221.

[57] Ibid. p78.

[58] Ibid. p81.

[59] Ibid. p90.
[60] Ibid. p165f.
[61] Ibid. p163.
[62] Ibid. p180f.
[63] David Fergusson, *Community, liberalism and Christian Ethics,* p21.
[64] Ibid. p9.
[65] Ibid. p167.
[66] 'It is in the areas where the Christian vision understands the point and purpose of individual life as a freedom-in-relationship that a clash with liberal conceptions of autonomy often arises.' Robert Gascoigne, *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics,* p213.
[67] David Fergusson, *Community, liberalism and Christian Ethics,* p169.
[68] Ibid. p169f.
[69] John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice,* p20.
[70] Ibid. p21.
[71] Ibid. p148.
[72] 'Church and Government Committee, Appendix D Supplementary Report to the General Board: 26 February 2004' pp36-58, *General Assembly Annual Reports 2004*, (Belfast: Northern Whig, 2004) p48.
[73] Ibid. p58.
[74] John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice,* p184.
[75] Difficulties when it comes to telling the story can include: - (a) not being believed (p8); (b) disgust on hearing the story may lead listeners to turn their back on the teller. (p11); (c) they even may defy description (p23) Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to all humanity* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989)
[76] Ibid. p44.
[77] John 1:14.
[78] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Remembrance and Forgetting: Building a Future for Northern Ireland (*Belfast: The Faith and Politics Group, 1998) p29.
[79] While Welch's work in this respect is directly in relation to the nuclear threat, I think it can be used effectively in a Church that finds itself pushed out to the fringes of Western European life.
[80] For a number of years, while the Troubles were at their height, a media ban operated, restricting those who were associated with paramilitary groups from making their views known in the public realm. The exclusion continued after the lifting of the ban by groups refusing to meet with and listen to those with prior connections. It exemplified one means of excluding, and thereby dominating, another group.
[81] Territory is marked with murals, the painting of curbstones and by flags and bunting.
[82] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Breaking Down the Enmity: Faith & Politics in the Northern Ireland Conflict (*Belfast: Shanway Distributors, 1993) p43.
[83] 'People in Northern Ireland are born into communities which have often been structurally and sometimes residentially divided since the Plantation of Ulster. The divisions are ratified and reinforced by different social patterns and mutual suspicion.' John Darby, *Scorpions in a bottle: Conflicting cultures in Northern Ireland* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1997) p66.
[84] Alwyn Thomson ed., *The Great White Tent* (Belfast: Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland, 1999) p22f.
[85] John Darby, *Scorpions in a bottle: Conflicting cultures in Northern Ireland,* p117.
[86] An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Breaking Down the Enmity,* p15.
[87] *The Coleraine Declaration*, Appendix A, para. 3.2.

[88] WCC, Faith and Order Paper 196, Thomas F. Best ed., *Faith And Order At The Crossroads: Kuala Lumpur 2004, The Plenary Commission Meeting* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005) p201.

APPENDIX A

THE COLERAINE DECLARATION

In 1840 two Presbyterian Churches, the General Synod of Ulster and the Secession Synod, came together to form the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

As well as giving thanks for 150 years of service, the General Assembly decided in 1988 to mark this anniversary by arranging a special meeting of the Assembly to look to the future.

850 elders and ministers met at the University of Ulster in Coleraine from 10th-13th September 1990 to worship, study preparatory papers, listen to lectures and take part in seminars.

On the final afternoon the Coleraine Declaration was 'received' by the Assembly as a document that witnessed to some of the insights and visions gained at Coleraine.

It was sent to the Boards and Committees of the Assembly, to Presbyteries and to Kirk Sessions for prayer, study, reflection and response.



The Coleraine Declaration

Gathered at this great Assembly, 850 of us in all, animated and uplifted by a fresh hearing of God's word, by joyful music and by songs of praise, we have been gripped by the Assembly's theme 'Transformed, not Conformed'.

We confess that too often we have been conformed to this world;

- by our failure to listen to God;
- by our lack of appetite for God;
- by our failure to recognise and use the power of prayer;
- by casually assuming God's presence with us;
- by our failure to listen to one another;
- by being bound to the traditions of the past;
- by being more committed to Presbyterianism than to Christ;
- by being content with superficial fellowship;
- by our preoccupation with money and possessions;
- by our failure to enable all our members to exercise their personal ministries;
- by ministering to ourselves rather than to others;
- by our lack of concern for the divisions within the Church, the Body of Christ;
- by not challenging sectarianism;
- by being afraid to take risks for our faith.

In spite of all this, we thankfully acknowledge God's mercy in calling us, unworthy as we are, to be His people, chosen and redeemed in Christ. It is our vision that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be transformed, so that we may

- be hungry for God - and His truth and righteousness;
- be open and willing to listen to His word;
- be enriched in worship as we celebrate God's awesome and joyful presence amongst us;
- be ready to make each congregation a living example of the family of God;
- be renewed in our personal and local church life so that members contribute to the total ministry;
- be willing to adopt a simple lifestyle, no longer preoccupied with money and possessions;
- be glad to share our time, talents and money for the work of God;
- be committed to mission, not only in our own country, but in all the world;

- be responsive to the needs of the world Christ came to save;
- be present as Christ's love, Christ's justice, and Christ's hope in the world's darkness and decay;
- be concerned to proclaim with new confidence and joy the saving name of Jesus, both by word and action;
- be gifted to present Christ attractively and to apply the Word relevantly;
- be able to affirm our oneness with all who sincerely love the Lord Jesus.

God make us a joyful and expectant Church, confident in Him who has made us His people, and given us a heavenly destiny.

God make us no longer a Church of yesterday, but a Church of today and tomorrow.

God make us mindful of Christ's living presence in our midst, leading us where He wants us to go, no longer conformed to this world, its mind-set and lifestyle, but transformed by the Spirit's renewing power.

To God be glory in the Church, now and ever.

COLERAINE DECLARATION

The Full Text

Preamble

1.1 The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, met in special General Assembly at the University of Ulster in Coleraine from 10-13 September, 1990;

1.2 gives thanks to Almighty God for His many blessings given to our Church from its first beginnings in Ireland;

1.3 and especially for the Union of Synods in 1840 and for all that we have received from the Lord during the 150 years since we first met in General Assembly.

1.4 We humbly acknowledge before God our many sins and failures, and pledge ourselves anew to seek first His Kingdom and righteousness in our common life, and in our witness to our society, and to the whole world in His Name.

The Mission of the Church

2.1 We rejoice afresh in the mission to which Christ has called us. Recognising His concern for the less privileged in society, we recognise our largely privileged membership, and we urge upon each congregation the need to share Christ's love with people of every kind, so that everyone may be reached with the gospel of Christ, and in turn may be prepared to offer their gifts in the life and mission of the congregation and of the wider Church.

2.2 Mission overseas has been a particular calling and enthusiasm of our Church since the inception of the General Assembly in 1840. We rejoice that God has enabled us to play our part in establishing the gospel in distant lands, and in building up the Churches there. We gratefully acknowledge also all that God has enabled us to receive and learn through the witness of partner Churches overseas, as well as from individual Christians from every continent

2.3 Recognising the enormous changes which are constantly taking place in our world, we affirm that the Great Commission of Christ our Lord is an unchanging mandate to preach the gospel to people everywhere, and we pledge ourselves afresh to the work of mission overseas, not Ieast in Europe. We shall continue wherever possible to do this in co-operation with partner Churches, and we shall endeavour to learn from their vision, insights and priorities how best we may express our solidarity with them in the work of the gospel. We call upon our own Church to give itself heart and soul for the work of mission, and pledge greater resources of personnel, money, and pastoral care to serve this end. We urge congregations

to set up overseas mission groups, and try to encourage active involvement, not Ieast by men.

3.1 Mission in Ireland must always be our first and immediate task, but mission has been seriously hindered by the unhappy divisions of Irish society, both North and South.

We confess that we have not done all that we should to break down those barriers. Within our Church we are deeply divided between those who would affirm what we have in common with Roman Catholics, and those who feel that to minimise the differences is to compromise the Gospel. Both sections need to listen to each other and learn from each other. For some of us 'Speaking the truth in love' will require new, sustained and costly efforts to build friendships across the sectarian divide; for others the challenge will come in not being afraid, in the context of existing friendships, to witness to reformed truth. Only through a biblical ecumenism which is concerned with both truth and love shall the wounds of the people be healed.

3.2 We believe that amid conflicting cultures God is willing us to create a distinctively Christian counter-culture, in which we distance ourselves from the kind of Protestantism which closely identifies the reformed faith with particular political and cultural aspirations.

We commit ourselves to learning what it means to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

3.3 In Northern Ireland, we need great courage to work for change, and the flexibility to find new ways of enabling the two traditions to relate to one another in a positive and constructive way, developing new structures that will build trust, and help create a just and sustainable community life for the years ahead. Many people of different backgrounds have acted with great courage in face of violence, intimidation, and deep personal hurt. We urge our people to act with equal courage also in finding new ways forward, playing whatever part they can in public life for the future good of all. To practise neighbourliness, and to bridge

divisions with friendship, and care for 'enemies', is the clear command of the gospel.

In Southern Ireland, where there is an atmosphere of greater harmony and openness, our people need to be courageous in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, and in sharing the biblical gospel in fellowship with all those who sincerely love the Lord.

3.4 In face of widespread indifference to the Church and to the gospel, especially in urban areas, we are freed with a gigantic evangelistic task. The whole Church must make resources available, both in terms of money, and of Church members who are prepared to engage in new and imaginative ways of teaching biblical truth, evangelism and Church planting.

3.5 Sensitive evangelism must take account of the sheer speed of change in recent decades, and what this has done to human life We need to challenge secular assumptions, (eg that wealth gives happiness, or that human wisdom has all the answers), and to minister to the confusion and bewilderment they have created, both by our words and deeds. We need to discern what are people's deepest hopes and fears, and to expose the emptiness of the secular sources of comfort to which they turn, and the power of the gospel of Christ alone to meet the real needs of our human condition.

4.1 The task of mission involves both the proclamation of the gospel of salvation, and the demonstration of the love of God through the works of the Kingdom. Evangelism and social concern are linked together inextricably in the purpose of God. We affirm the wide-ranging concerns in which we have been and still are involved. We are determined to work with other Christians as salt and light in contemporary society, challenging injustice, and offering compassion and help to people in their needs. This must involve both biblical insight and adequate social analysis, as well as caring in practical ways in the name of the Lord Jesus. New initiatives will inevitably involve taking risks.

4.2 The constraints of time, manpower and resources inevitably mean setting limits to what we attempt to do, and particularly in the field of social witness. At a local level there needs to be a genuine listening to the community we seek to serve, so that they may have some part in setting the agenda. Local people need to know that our Church not only preaches the gospel, but lives the gospel in the love and compassion of Christ.

4.3 Congregations need to be regularly informed of the wider work of the Church, carried out in their name. A deeper sense of mission needs to be developed, both centrally and locally, so that we become less concerned with the maintenance of buildings, projects and present patterns of ministry, and make mission our priority, sharing the limited resources available to us, and deciding in a prayerful and ordered way what God is leading us to do.

4.4 The Church must develop a strategy for urban mission, adequately financed, as a matter of high priority. Forward-looking policies regarding buildings, co-operation with other Churches, partnerships between suburban and inner-city congregations, the development of team ministries, significant lay leadership, the setting up of mission centres, are all areas that must be explored.

4.5 Three-quarters of our congregations are rural, and this is often where our Church appears at its strongest with much generosity for local needs. Rural congregations, however, are often unenthusiastic about the needs of the wider Church, and lacking in leadership. Their members are often too reserved to share their faith with others. It is important that our Church should develop new ways of rural evangelism, social witness and pastoral care, and of training elders and lay people to be involved in such tasks.

4.6 Recognising the value of small groups from the model of Jesus' ministry and the experience of many congregations all over the world, we would urge the greater use of such groups in our congregations, particularly for evangelism, discipleship training,and to foster community care. Such groups must be carefully integrated into the life of the whole congregation.

The Life of the Church

5.1 Our engagement in the tasks of mission involves a particular understanding of the nature of the Church 'We believe one holy, catholic and apostolic Church...' We confess that, while valuing the diversity of our several traditions, we have been less than enthusiastic about visible unity. The quest for unity is a costly and difficult one, and beset with many problems. We rejoice in the privilege of belonging to the one Church of Christ, and we will seek to give visible expression to this whenever and however we and our sister Churches can in conscience do so.

5.2 The ordained ministry is one of the Church's most important resources. Many ministers are overburdened, and hindered in their spiritual, pastoral and teaching tasks, by the pressures of correspondence, administration and representative roles in the community and the wider Church. Ways must be found, especially at congregational level, of liberating ministers to fulfil their primary tasks.

5.3 The strengths of our traditional theological education need to be released into a new integration of theory and practice. This must address the problems of 'ministry' in inner cities, rural areas, and in counselling, youth work, and social witness. None of these problems will be properly tackled without the kind of training which equips a Ieader to motivate others.

5.4 The scriptural pattern of ministry encourages us to motivate, train and utilise a team in the outworking of congregational life and mission. The ordination of men and women to the eldership has built this biblical perception into the structures of our local churches. The Kirk Session, together with Congregational Committee and the local leaders of many kinds ought already to have experience of working as a team. In practice, we acknowledge we have often been weakened by the absence of vision and lack of resources, team leadership, and training. We urge Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions to review our present practice,

and to seek ways to equip elders and others for this approach to ministry.

5.5 Christians are indeed God's pilgrim people in the world; as such they should travel light and live simply. They should not be enslaved to materialism or indulgent living, but ready to share their resources with others. The biblical principle of tithing should be taught and encouraged in our congregations so that, in a willing and cheerful way, funds may be released to further the work of God. Sacrificial sharing of time, energy and possessions, as well as a healthy disregard for their own comfort, should characterise the lives of Christian people.

6.1 The Church is the family of God. As such it incorporates into its membership Christian families, including singles, widowed, childless couples, one-parent families, as well as parents and children. We hold to the scriptural principles of purity before marriage, and fidelity within marriage. Increasingly, however, we are being called upon to offer pastoral care and counsel to those whose marriages are in serious difficulties, or have already come to an end, and to divorced persons seeking re-marriage Congregations need to take these pastoral opportunities much more seriously. Training for those involved in counselling, who need not always be ministers, should be made available frequently. Presbyteries should encourage the provision of marriage preparation courses and marriage enrichment courses.

6.2 Loving family relationships are God's purpose for His children and we should do all in our power to instruct our people and to model before them authentic Christian family living, in all its love and discipline. The local congregation in a real sense should be a family and a fellowship should encourage hospitality, using the homes of its people as a base for fellowship, pastoral care and evangelism.

6.3 The majority of those who come to personal faith do so before the age of twenty! Believing in the place of children within the covenant of grace, we need constantly to reassess our ministry to

children and young people, as to its effectiveness in leading them to faith in the Lord Jesus, and building them up in discipleship. Church must be for them a place where they know they belong, and where they feel valued and loved throughout their growing years. Both here at Church and in the home they must be taught about the faith so that they are enabled to relate it to life in the world as they know it. There is a desire to re-emphasise the significance of sacramental discipline, and to reappraise the consistency of our approach to it.

The Worship of the Church

7.1 The renewal of the Church, for which we long, depends in the ultimate sense not upon human organisation, but upon the grace of God, bestowed in Christ, and sealed to us by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We humbly acknowledge our deep sense of failure and need, as we call upon God to cleanse and forgive us, and to renew us by His word and Spirit, so that we may serve Him as we ought, and carry out the work of mission faithfully, as He has entrusted it to us.

7.2 In such renewal, worship is central. We rejoice in the gifts of God for the people of God. Biblical preaching must be at the very heart of true worship. It must, of course, be presented attractively, and applied sharply to the actual situations and needs of our time. Yet the nourishment of mind and heart cannot adequately be accomplished by Sunday worship alone. We urge Kirk Sessions to be creative in providing additional opportunities to study the Bible, and we urge our people to take these seriously.

7.3 The sacraments are also gifts of God, and should be celebrated with joy. Careful ordering of the services can go hand in hand with the use of modern worship resources. The biblical practice of frequent communion is worthy of serious consideration by ministers and Kirk Sessions.

7.4 A rediscovery of prayer is also of vital importance to public worship, as well as to personal discipleship and congregational life.

It is the clue to the Church's renewal, and to the effective carrying out of her mission. Many of our people miss out on the discipline and joy of personal prayer, and are fearful and ill-at-ease at the prospect of praying with others. These barriers must be overcome if we are to have the joy of seeing prayer answered in the renewal of the Church and the healing of our land. We need to help our people to more disciplined prayer in personal and family contexts, to more meaningful participation in the public prayer of the Church, and to a new commitment to group prayer.

7.5 The singing of praise is another important part of Christian worship. Recognising that music should help to renew the mind rather than the emotions it is believed that music and songs must be related to the worship and the Word. The time has now come for a new supplemental hymnary incorporating some of the best of recent material. The revision of the Psalter ought also to be contemplated, since the Psalms must always have a normative place in Christian worship. We call upon our congregations to give a high priority to improving the standard of Church music, offering possibilities for wider training and experience to organists, choirs and others involved in congregational music. We call on all our people to put new heart into their singing and to let the inspiration and joy of Christian praise be heard in all our Churches.

Conclusion

8.1 The General Assembly records its grateful thanks to all who have organised this special residential Assembly and have contributed to its programme through teaching, discussion, the leading of worship and in any way.

8.2 We offer thanks to Almighty God for all that we have learned and shared together in these days, and pledge ourselves anew to Him, and to the tasks of mission to which He sends us.

To the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be glory in the Church now and ever.

APPENDIX B

MISSION STATEMENT OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND

received by the GENERAL ASSEMBLY at its meeting to mark the 350th anniversary of the first Presbytery in Ireland
JUNE 1992

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND, as a Reformed Church within the wider body of Christ
is grounded in the Scriptures,
and exists to love and honour God
through faith in His Son and by the power of His Spirit,
and to enable her members to play their part
in fulfilling God's mission to our world.

GOD CALLS US TO A SHARED LIFE
in which we love, honour and are reconciled to one another
whilst respecting our diversity
within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.
We are called to encourage
the exercise of the gifts of every member of the Body
for the work of ministry and,
seeking the renewal of the whole Church,
to co-operate with other parts of Christ's Church
without betrayal of our convictions.

GOD CALLS US TO WORSHIP HIM with our whole lives,
meeting together in groups large and small
and gathering especially on the Lord's Day
for the preaching and study of His word,
the celebration of the sacraments
and the offering of prayer and praise with reverence and joy,
using language, form and music appropriate
both to Scripture and to our time and culture.

GOD CALLS US TO MISSION as witnesses to Christ
through both evangelism and social witness
challenging the values of the world in which we live
with the values of God's kingdom
and winning men and women to faith and discipleship.
This mission is to be pursued amongst all the people of Ireland
and the peoples of the European Community and the whole world:
those with whom we feel comfortable,
those from whom we feel alienated
and those who are in any way distant from us in culture and faith.

WE OURSELVES ARE CHALLENGED with a biblical discipleship
which is radical in its
self denial,
simplicity of lifestyle,
stewardship of money,
faithful relationships,
prayerfulness,
concern for the world which God has created
and love for its people whom he loves
and for whose salvation He gave his Son.

APPENDIX C

DECLARATION AND RESOLUTIONS OF THE SOCIETY OF UNITED IRISHMEN OF BELFAST

In the present great era of reform, when unjust government are falling in every quarter of Europe; when religious persecution is compelled to abjure her tyranny over conscience; when the rights of man are ascertained in theory, and that theory substantiated by practice; when antiquity can no longer defend absurd and oppressive forms, against the common sense and common interests of mankind; when all government is acknowledged to originate from the people, And to be so far only obligatory as it protects their rights and promotes their welfare: We think it our duty, as Irishmen, to come forward, and state what we feel to be our heavy grievance, and what we know to be its effectual remedy. WE HAVE NO NATIONAL GOVERNMENT; we are ruled by Englishmen, and the servants of Englishmen, whose object is the interest of another country, whose instrument is corruption, and whose strength is the weakness of Ireland; and these men have the whole of the power and patronage of the country, as means to seduce and to subdue the honesty and the spirit of her representatives in the legislature. Such an extrinsic power, acting with uniform force in a direction too frequently opposite to the true line of our obvious interests, can be resisted with effect solely by *unanimity, decision, and spirit in the people*; qualities which may be exerted most legally, constitutionally, and efficaciously, by that great measure essential to the prosperity and freedom of Ireland; AN EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF ALL THE PEOPLE IN PARLIAMENT. We do not here mention as grievances, the rejection of a place-bill, of a pension-bill, of a responsibility-bill, the sale of Peerages in one House, the corruption publicly avowed in the other, nor the notorious infamy of borough traffic between both; not that we are insensible of their enormity, but that we consider them as but symptoms of that mortal disease which corrodes the vitals of our Constitution,

and leaves to the people, in their own Government, but the shadow of a name.

Impressed with these sentiments, we have agreed to form an association, to be called '; THE SOCIETY OF UNITED IRISHMEN:' And we do pledge ourselves to our country, and mutually to each other, that we will steadily support, and endeavour, by all due means, to carry into effect, the following resolutions:

First, Resolved, That the weight of English influence in the Government of this country is so great, as to require a cordial union among ALL THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND, to maintain that balance which is essential to the preservation of our liberties, and the extension of our commerce.

Second, That the sole constitutional mode by which this influence can be opposed, is by a complete and radical reform of the representation of the people in Parliament.

Third, That no reform is practicable, efficacious, or just, which shall not include Irishmen of every *religious* persuasion.

Satisfied, as we are, that the intestine divisions among Irishmen have too often given encouragement and impunity to profligate, audacious, and corrupt Administrations, in measures which, but for these divisions, they durst not have attempted; we submit our resolutions to the nation, as the basis of our political faith.

We have now gone to what we conceive to be the remedy. With a Parliament thus reformed, every thing is easy; without it, nothing can be done: and we do call on and most earnestly exhort our countrymen in general to follow our example, and to form similar societies in every quarter of the Kingdom, for the promotion of constitutional knowledge, the abolition of bigotry in religion and politics, and the equal distribution of the rights of man through all sects and denominations of Irishmen. The people, when thus collected, will feel their own weight, and secure that power which theory has already admitted as their portion, and to which, if they be not aroused by their present provocations to vindicate it, they deserve to forfeit their pretensions FOR EVER.

Theobald Wolfe Tone, Belfast, October 1791

APPENDIX D

PRESBYTERIAN MINISTERS AND PROBATIONERS SUSPECTED OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE 1798 REBELLION

In his list of those involved, McBride covers all of the Dissenting traditions and indicates, where it is possible to do so, those who were of the Old and New Light parties. From his list it is clear that there is an almost equal theological split among those who were involved in the United Irish cause.

PRESBYTERY OF ANTRIM

Rev. Arthur McMahon, Holywood	New Light
Rev. Futt Marshall, Ballyclare	New Light
Rev. William Sinclair, First Newtownards	New Light
Rev. James Worrall, First Larne	New Light

GENERAL SYNOD OF ULSTER

Presbytery of Armagh

Rev. Boyle Moody, Newry	New Light
Rev. William Neilson, Dundalk	New Light
Mr William Hamilton Drummond	New Light

Presbytery of Ballymena

Rev. Henry Henry, Connor	Old Light
Mr John McNish, Clough	New Light?

Presbytery of Bangor

Rev. James Porter, Greyabbey	New Light
Rev. Robert Gowdie, Dunover	
Mr James Hull	New Light
Mr John Miles	New Light
Mr David Bailie Warden	New Light

Presbytery of Belfast

Rev. Thomas Ledlie Birch, Saintfield	Old Light
Rev. Alexander Henry, Castlereagh	Old Light?
Rev. Sinclair Kelburn, Third Belfast	Old Light
Rev. James Simpson, Second Newtownards	Old Light
Mr Archibald Warwick	Old Light?

Presbytery of Clogher

Rev. James Davidson, Aughnacloy & Ballygawley

Presbytery of Derry

Rev. Robert Steel, Scriggan, Dungiven	Old Light
Mr John Pinkerton	
Mr Reuben Rogers	Old Light?

Presbytery of Dromore

Rev. Samuel Barber, Rathfriland	New Light
Rev. Alexander Patterson, Drumbanagher	Old Light?
Rev. John Sherrard, Tullylish	Old Light?
Rev. Samuel Watson, Killinchy	New Light
Mr William Adair	

Presbytery of Killyleagh

Rev. William Steel Dickson, Portaferry	New Light
Rev. Joseph Jackson, Creggan & Newtownhamilton	
Rev. Robert Porter, Clough	New Light

Presbytery of Letterkenny

Rev. Francis Dill, Ray	Old Light

Presbytery of Monaghan

Rev. John Arnold, Ballybay	Old Light?
Rev. Robert Montgomery, First Bailieborough	
Rev. William Moore, Ervey & Carrickmaklin	
Rev. Thomas Stewart, Cootehill	

Presbytery of Route

Rev. John Glendy, Maghera	Old Light?
Rev. Robert Scott, Duneane	New Light
Rev. John Smyth, First Kilrea	Old Light?
Mr Benjamin Mitchell	

Presbytery of Strabane

Rev. William Dunlop, Badoney	New Light

Presbytery of Templepatrick

Rev. Robert Acheson, Glenarm	New Light
Rev. Robert Alexander, Cairncastle	
Rev. Robert Campbell, Templepatrick	New Light
Rev. Adam Hall, Ballynure	New Light
Rev. John Lawson, Cairncastle	

Presbytery of Tyrone

Rev. Moses Hogg, Loughgall	
Mr Robert Hogg	New Light
Mr Charles Wallace	

SECEDERS

Rev. James Harper, Knockloughrim	Old Light
Rev. Thomas Smith, Ahoghill & Randalstown	Old Light
Rev. Josias Wilson, Donegore	Old Light

REFORMED PRESBYTERY

Rev. William Stavely, Knockbracken	Old Light
Rev. William Gibson	Old Light
Rev. Joseph Orr	Old Light
Mr John Black	Old Light
Mr Samuel Brown Wylie	Old Light

OTHERS

Mr James Connell, Garvagh
Rev. George Potts
Rev. ____ Thompson
Mr James Townsend, Greyabbey
Mr John Wardlow
Rev. William Warnock, Co. Down

Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) pp232-236.

McBride's list is the most comprehensive I have been able to find, but it is useful to include the list provided by Liam Swords which, instead of McBride's sixty-seven names, includes thirty-one names.

Rev. Arthur McMahon, Holywood, who turned informer.
Rev. William Sinclair, Newtownards, who went to America.
Rev. John McIlwaine, Newtownards, who went to America.
Mr Futt Marshall, Ballyclare. There is no record of his ordination but it seems to have taken place in 1795. He was present with the rebels on Donegore Hill and afterwards returned to his charge and died in 1813.

Mr/Rev. John Worrall, probationer, originally from Limerick. He was ordained for Larne in 1796 and locally known to be a lieutenant. He was arrested and imprisoned in Carrick Castle. In 1802 he moved to Clonmel congregation.
Rev. James Porter, Greyabbey.
Rev. Samuel Barbour, Rathfriland. He was a Colonel in the First Newry Regiment of the Volunteers and was imprisoned.
Rev. William Steel Dickson, Portaferry.
Rev. Thomas Alexander, Cairncastle. He was imprisoned.
Rev. Robert Campbell, Templepatrick. There is no evidence that he was a United Irishman but he was sympathetic to their cause and helpful to them. A gun used at the Battle of Antrim was concealed in his meeting-house.
Rev. John Smith, Holywood. He was imprisoned twice.
Rev. Adam Hill, Ballynure, who was imprisoned.
Rev. Robert Scott, Duneane. He was charged with treason but later acquitted.
Rev. James Simpson, First Newtownards. While arrested and charged he was allowed to travel to America.
Rev. William Dunlop, Badoney. He was not a member of the United Irishmen but he was sympathetic to their cause.
Mr David Bailie Warden, probationer in the Presbytery of Bangor. He was a Colonel in the United Irishmen. On surrender he was imprisoned.
Mr James Hull, who went to America.
Mr John Miles, who went to America.
Mr William Fox, who went to America.
Mr Archibald Warwick, licentiate of the Presbytery of Belfast who was found guilty of reason and executed at Kirkcubbin in 1798.
Mr Benjamin Mitchell, a licentiate in the Presbytery of Route, who was imprisoned for alleged treason but then released.
Mr Charles Wallace, a licentiate of the Presbytery of Tyrone, who was imprisoned and transported to America.
Mr William Adair, commander at the Battle of Saintfield, who went to America.
Mr James Townsend, a teacher in Porter's school at Greyabbey. He was a leader at the Battle of Saintfield and Second in command at the Battle of Ballynahinch. He went to America.
Rev. Thomas Ledlie Birch, Saintfield. He had sympathy with the United Irish cause, was imprisoned and went to America.
Boyle Moody, Newry. His role in the United Irishmen is unclear but he was imprisoned.
Mr John McNish, probationer in the Presbytery of Antrim.
Mr James Connell, Mr Robert Steel, Mr John Pinkerton, and Mr Reuben Rogers, who all escaped to America.

Liam Swords, ed., *Protestant, Catholic & Dissenter: The Clergy And 1798* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1997) pp88-113.

APPENDIX E

THE CHURCH'S PEACE VOCATION

WE, MEMBERS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND,

called by God,
in the grace of Jesus Christ,
and the power of the Holy Spirit,
to live in faith, hope and love,
as children of our heavenly Father,
and witnesses to God's Kingdom ,
publicly acknowledge our vocation to peace,
which is both the gift and mission placed on us by God.

WE BELIEVE that the same evangelical faith in Jesus Christ,
which emboldens us to pray to God as our heavenly Father,
challenges us to develop radically new attitudes and relationships
with our neighbours in Ireland.

WE AFFIRM that to be Christian peacemakers in our own situation:
We must grasp more clearly the distinctive teaching of our Lord
which challenges the general practice of our world,
and breaks the vicious cycle of matching injury with injury,
hate with hate, ignorance with ignorance.
We must therefore be prepared to meet and talk together:
with those in our own church with whom we have disagreements;
with those from churches whose practices and beliefs differ from our own;
with those from whom we are politically divided.

WE AFFIRM that to be Christian peacemakers in our own situation:
we must recognise the responsibility given by God to government,
and to those who serve the cause of law and order,
so as to encourage well-doing, correct evil-doers, and protect the innocent.

We must therefore reject violence;
seek ways to advance justice and promote the welfare of the needy;
affirm that in democratic societies all citizens are called to share in these responsibilities;
and encourage all efforts to establish new structures of consent and participation.

WE AFFIRM that to be Christian peacemakers in our own situation:
We must be initiators of programmes of action
which will contribute to peace in our community.
We must therefore provide resources and encouragement to enable congregations to move forward at the local level in the field of inter-community relations.

WE UNDERSTAND peacemaking to be an affirmation and accommodation of diversity,
and that our particular history in this land of divided communities and recurring violence,
of mutual suspicion, fear and injury,
makes it imperative that we reassert the Church's own proper calling
to seek peace, and the things that make for peace
in our day.

Adopted by the General Assembly, June 8th, 1994

APPENDIX F

ACT OF UNION, 1840

"Whereas, above two centuries ago, extensive Colonies of Presbyterian settlers from Scotland and elsewhere were planted in Ireland, whose Ministers and Elders afterwards formed themselves into an Ecclesiastical body, holding the Standards and adopting the Discipline of the parent Church of Scotland; which Ecclesiastical body was for a time designated 'The Presbytery of Ulster;' and subsequently received, and has ever since been known by, the name and designation of 'The General Synod of Ulster.' And Whereas, about a century ago, another Presbyterian body, being a branch of the Secession Church in Scotland, likewise holding the Standards and adopting the Discipline of the Church of Scotland, but seceding from the jurisdiction of the Church, was introduced into Ireland; which last mentioned body, being for a time divided into two Synods, bearing the distinction of 'The Associate Synod of Ireland,' and 'The Associate Synod of Ireland in subordination of the General Associate Synod of Scotland' respectively, subsequently united into one Synod, which has been, and is now, known by the name of the 'Presbyterian Synod of Ireland distinguished by the name Seceders.' And Whereas, it hath pleased Almighty God in his merciful providence to remove the causes of difference and alienation hitherto unhappily subsisting between the said General Synod of Ulster, and the said Presbyterian Synod of Ireland, distinguished by the name Seceders, and to dispose of these two Churches to unite under the same Standards as aforesaid, as founded on and agreeable to the Word of God, in Christian communion and fellowship, as the Ecclesiastical body under the Great head of the Church. And Whereas, it has been severally agreed, by the said Church in Synod, duly assembled, to constitute themselves, as aforesaid, into one Church, in the manner and under the designation hereinafter mentioned.

"It is hereby accordingly Resolved and Agreed upon, in the name of the Lord Jesus Chris, the Great Head of the Church, by the said General Synod of Ulster and the said Presbyterian Synod of the Church, by the said General Synod of Ulster and the said Presbyterian Synod of Ireland distinguished by the

name of Seceders, on this 10th day of July, in the year of our Lord 1840, duly assembled together, that they do now, and in all tines and hereafter shall, constitute one United Church, professing the same common faith, as set forth in the Standards as aforesaid; and in all matters Ecclesiastical exercising, and subject to, the same Government and Discipline; each nevertheless retaining and reserving, in respect of any temporalism belonging thereto, or to the several congregations respectively under it care, or to any persons in trust for them or any of them, all civil rights, interests, and estates, whatever, in as full and ample a manner, to all intents and purposes whatsoever, as if the said Union of these Churches had not taken place, to and for the same uses, and upon the same trusts respectively, as heretofore in any wise are or have been expressed or declared of or concerning the same.

"And it is hereby further Resolved and Agreed upon, as aforesaid, that the said United Church, so constituted, shall henceforth bear the name and designation of 'The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, consisting of the General Synod of Ulster and the Presbyterian Synod of Ireland distinguished by the name of Seceders:' and its supreme Court shall be styled, 'The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.'

"And it is hereby Resolved and Agreed upon, that, notwithstanding said Union, the two Synods, as aforesaid, shall reserved, and they do hereby reserve, to themselves and to the Ministers and Elders of the Congregations under their care respectively, and to the successors of such Ministers and Elders for the time being, the right of meeting hereafter in Synod, but only concerning such temporalities as aforesaid, as distinct Bodies, with the necessary Officers, as heretofore, as such General Synod of Ulster, and as such Presbyterian Synod of Ireland distinguished by the name of Seceders, from time to time, as occasion may require, with full power to make all arrangements, and to do and perform all proper, legal, and equitable acts necessary to protect and preserve all their separate rights, interests, and estates, as aforesaid."

THE UNION WAS NOW PERFECTED. The Rev. Dr. Hanna being unanimously elected Moderator, proceeded immediately by prayer to constitute, in the name of the Great Head of the

Church, the first GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND.

Minutes of The General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Ireland: consisting of The General Synod of Ulster and The Presbyterian Synod of Ireland distinguished by the name of Seceders: held in Belfast, July 1840
Belfast: Paul Kelso, Joy's Court MDCCXL p24

APPENDIX G

THE FALLS AND SHANKILL THINK TANKS

The Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill Road are areas in Belfast that typify the different sections of the community in Northern Ireland. They represent groups of people who have traditionally been excluded from public discursive space. This exclusion has come about for both social and political reasons. "Think Tanks", however infelicitously named, have been established in order to give people a voice. Thus, meetings were set up with community activists, ex-prisoners, young people, and others, in order to give them an opportunity to express their hopes and fears. The Think Tanks bring to public awareness what those excluded have to offer from their own experience. They provide opportunities for people to speak, even if politicians do not seem to want to hear, for,

> ... while both communities were increasingly aware of each other's everyday realities, it was quite obvious that many politicians still had no real appreciation of grassroots concerns. [1]

The two project – Falls and Shankill – represented a a joint initiative between the Springfield Inter-Community Development Project and Michael Hall of Island Publications.

The FALLS THINK TANK 1996

Discussion within the process focused on: -

- What it was like to grow up in a divided society
- Violence
- Civil rights
- Betrayal by the Catholic middle class
- Church
- Young people
- Cynicism regarding Protestant 'Britishness'
- Protestant concerns

The general feeling was that things were happening at grassroots level that politicians knew little about, and perhaps they did not want to know about them.

> There is an acceptance that the only place where genuine attempts to reach accommodation are taking place is at the grassroots, and cross-community contacts have been established which were unthinkable a few years before. [2]

THE SHANKILL THINK TANK 1998

The Think Tank took place just before the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, March 1998. The focus was largely on Protestant fears, which had come to the fore at the prospect of uncertain political change:

> Among many Protestants fears were reawakened that their heritage, their 'Britishness', and the Union itself were all under threat as never before. [3]

Subjects covered included: -

- The media
- Parades
- Suspicion as to how serious Republicans were about the political process
- Loss of Britishness
- Culture
- Tribal loyalty
- Accepting blame.

There was a strong identification, in this context, with being British, yet the people of the Shankill felt that they had neither been listened to, nor understood.

> Despite this strong identification with Britishness some Shankill Road Protestants felt that outsiders, even other Protestants, mistakenly assumed that they had a similar identification with all the trappings of 'Protestant' culture. [4]

When they were asked about the Catholic/Nationalist community, it was clear that there was some awareness of the issues that were

real for that part of the community. There was also a sense of shared issues which people within their own tradition did not entirely understand - for example, ex-prisoners within the community. Whether or not contact would be valuable with the Falls Think Tank was a matter for discussion, but the general feeling was that it had to be faced.

What has been happening at grassroots level, in terms of giving the opportunity for discussion and reflection, is evidence that a sense of community has not been suppressed, even by thirty years of violence. It is also evidence that those who live in areas most affected by violence, have something vital and significant to contribute to the political process. It is my belief that when politicians resist the involvement of these groups, it is because they know that people from these sections of the community will confront them with a realism that they find uncomfortable. Realities on the nationalist Falls and unionist Shankill Roads do not keep people from making peace with one another. Rather, realities challenge people politically divided from one another to make peace in a world of difference and separation.

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[1] *At the Crossroads? – The Shankill Think Tank (*Newtownabbey: Island Publications, 1998) p23.
[2] *Ourselves Alone? Voices from Belfast's nationalist working class – The Falls Think Tank (*Newtownabbey: Island Publications, 1996) p24.
[3] *At the Crossroads? – The Shankill Think Tank,* p3.
[4] Ibid. p12.

APPENDIX H

THE LOWER ANTRIM ROAD CLERGY FELLOWSHIP

After Vatican II there was an excitement about ecumenical relationships in Northern Ireland that had not pertained before. Many felt that there was a new freedom to relate to one another. Despite continuing opposition[1] to inter-church relationships Carlisle Patterson, an Irish Presbyterian and ecumenist, writes of the years following Vatican II that,

> Protestant Churches, including those of the Reformed tradition, could not ignore the new situation created by the Council.[2]

In some geographical areas, however, that was more difficult than in others. The Lower Antrim Road, Belfast, is one of those areas where relationships across the community have been fraught. During the years of the Troubles, the level of killing, together with the geographical layout of the community (it is a patchwork of small groups of Catholic/Nationalists and Protestant/Unionists), encouraged people to stay within their own section of the community.

A group of local ministers, priests and full-time Christian workers began to meet in the middle 1980's. The group had representatives from all Christian traditions. In the early 1990's the group began to consider how it could best contribute to inter-community life. The traditional ways of engaging in ecumenical relationships were not open to the group as Protestants, in particular, felt (conscientiously) unable to worship in a Roman Catholic Church. United services of worship, during Unity Week for example, were not an acceptable option. Could an alternative route be found?

The group felt that what was needed was mutual education and so they began a programme in which, twice each year, everyone would be invited to another church. The opportunity was made at a time that was not a worship time and the minister or

priest in each parish was left to decide what form the education would take. The event would only last for an hour. It was an attempt to begin to get people to move around the community as they had not done before.

The area that the group represents is one plagued by what has come to be known as 'recreational rioting'. A number of violent incidents led the group to reconsider its role in the community. The majority of members in the group felt that they could take a more active role while some felt that they preferred to persist in prayer and study. To facilitate all the members, the group began a two-strand programme – one focused on community involvement and one on prayer and study. Those engaged in community involvement began to meet with the local police, community workers, politicians, paramilitaries, The Lord Mayor of Belfast, (who commented that in all his years as a politician a church-based group had never asked to meet him), and anyone else who was open to the prospect. The group refused to be guided by the sensitivities which others expressed about who should and should not be spoken to. The rationale behind the meetings was that everyone, in some way or another, had the good of the community at heart. The meetings were the group's attempt to affirm shared concern and seek common ways to fulfill the desire for a better life for all. The exercise of meeting always began in listening.

As far as the group was concerned it was interesting that the two-strand approach became unnecessary – everyone went to everything. The group's activities also became known so that other local groups began to seek them out. In times of trouble police contacted them, and members of the group remain in personal contact with people met during those years. The group's activities were curtailed by a union with another Ministers' Fellowship in 1998.[3]

The history of the Lower Antrim Road Clergy Fellowship represents one way in which local church leaders can engage in good relationships with others in the community without being theologically complacent, arrogant, or triumphalist. The risks which the group took paid off in the recognition they gained, the interest they were known to have. The new relevance gained enabled them

to bring significant influence to bear on a variety of contextual needs and challenges.

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[1] "There were strong forces in the Northern Ireland situation, however, including Paisleyism and the Orange Order, which were dedicated to resisting fiercely any suggestion that Protestants and Roman Catholics could treat one another as brothers and sisters belonging to the one Church." Carlisle Patterson, *Over the Hill: Ecumenism in the Irish Presbyterian Church* (Belfast: T. C. Patterson, 1997) p34

[2] Op. Cit. p30

[3] Since 1998 the group has reformed itself many times but has recently returned to the belief that engagement with others claiming to seek the good of the local community is necessary. Therefore, conversations have begun again with those who influence the geography, social make-up, economics, security and peace of North Belfast.

APPENDIX I

A VIEW FROM A LOCAL CONGREGATION

Fortwilliam Park Presbyterian Church is a congregation situated in inner City North Belfast. The congregation has experienced a dramatic drop in membership owing, in large measure, to the shift of the Protestant population out of the area. The congregation's future is under review. They have been given the challenge of assessing how they might provide a witness which does not double up on that supplied by other local congregations. If there is no 'particular' pastoral or mission niche, the congregation will be united with a neighbouring congregation. As a beginning to the process of assessing their future, the congregation engaged in a consultation with some groups in the local community. This is one example of how a local congregation can engage with others and live an ethic, based in *ecclesia semper reformanda*. As minister of the congregation I made the following report to the Kirk Session at the conclusion of the consultation process.

FORTWILLIAM PARK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Reflection on Community Consultation **March 1999**

The consultation process began out of our reflection on the future of the congregation and where that might lie, given that we are a congregation of falling numbers, and that we find it increasingly difficult to sustain ourselves in traditional forms of worship and witness. This realisation on our part is coupled with a realisation that we have very little idea of what is going on in our parish area. We have become a community of people out of touch with the geographical area that is our area of witness. The question might best be formed - How do we, as a Presbyterian Community, witness most meaningfully in a community which is largely Roman Catholic, although, many would claim no allegiance with any of the Christian Churches? The options are: -

a. To shut up shop and move on, on the basis that there is no specific witness for us and no role for us arising from our commitment to the gospel.
b. To carry on as we are and permit the course of time to quietly lay us to rest.
c. To carry on as we are believing that simply bearing witness is enough and that the mode of that witness is irrelevant.
d. To look at new possibilities and listen for a call to a less traditional style of worship and witness which directly responds to the community. This is not to say that selling out on the gospel would ever be intended. It is to say that witness has always to take place in a specific context and it is to that context that we must attend.

The consultation process was designed to enable us to listen to the context in which we are called to witness. It is to acknowledge that the space between church and world has become a huge chasm that the church cannot easily bridge. The challenge to the church comes in the form of criticism regarding forms of worship, buildings and structures. However, this chasm is perhaps most starkly seen not in the criticisms but in the silence. For many, the church is no longer a port of call, a place of refuge nor the centre for meaning and hope. It is into this situation that we are called to live, in the Name of Christ. It is this situation, this context, that we are called to address from our faith perspective. Having listened to the context, we listen for the call of God. This call comes from the context itself but is grounded in the sending words of Jesus as recorded in Mark 16 v15:

> ***Go to every part of the world, and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.***

The Great Commission is for us in our time in whatever context we find ourselves.

It has also to be noted that the context of our parish area reflects the wider context of Northern Ireland. It is a community living in the shadow of violence and grief but nevertheless a

community that has found its own resources in the situation of conflict that obtained over the last almost 30 years. It is a community that knows the power of light in darkness, life in death, hope in despair. Through its very life this community has experienced resurrection as essentially bound up with crucifixion.

Over the time of the Consultation we met with other individuals and groups:

1. Billy Mitchell, director of a local community outreach group. Billy has been working in the community development field and offers this as a means by which the church can address the world at the turn of the 20th Century. From the story of the feeding of the 5000 he presented a 5-point plan:-
    a. Establish the need
    b. Take ownership of the situation
    c. Identify your resources
    d. Organise the situation and response
    e. Put the plan into action

Billy Mitchell's enthusiasm and commitment are an inspiration and the clarity of his presentation caught our imagination.

2. *Home-Start*. The organisation provides support for families under stress. Their system of home volunteers, supplemented by Mother & Toddler Groups, help to sustain families and keep them together. The representatives shared the problems which they encounter in our community - single parent families, lack of family support, domestic violence, alcoholism and drug abuse. All of these contribute to the instabilities of family life. They indicated that they would appreciate a community facility, advertising for volunteers or fundraising support.

3. *Little America Community Group*. This community group is in its infancy as an umbrella group, but includes groups which have been going for a considerable length of time e.g. Kansas Residents' Group has been working for 20 years. Included under their umbrella are 9 groups - 3 resident's associations, 3

youth groups, 1 women's group, a youth steering forum and the local festival group. The key areas of work identified were:

a. Housing
b. Environment
c. Youth

The Little America representatives have identified the social and demographic changes in the area, (Their catchment area is almost identical to our parish area) as showing 2 distinct trends - an ageing Protestant population and a young RC population. Their aim is to build community identity and develop an area attractive for people to live in.
They used statistics taken from the 1991 census to demonstrate the changing situation.

1991	2000 people	1050 households
	33% under 19 years	
	70% Roman Catholic	
	8% Protestant	
	0-4 age group 77% Catholic	1% Protestant
	Pensioners 56% Catholic	24% Protestant

They are essentially a Roman Catholic group but are working hard at building relationships with groups in Protestant communities, especially the Westland Community Group. Their efforts, in conjunction with Protestant groups, over the disturbances around the Drumcree Protests have been influential in keeping violence at as low a level as possible. They reflected the drug problem in the area, the issue of young people having nowhere to go and nothing to do, the elderly community whose needs are great, and the fluid population of people who come in and our of the area and rent accommodation. They are anxious to work with any group in the community and see the church as a significant player. Premises for them, like so many others, are at issue as there is no one, large, community resource. Little America looks forward to building up their group structure to include women,

children and young people and to provide education around the issue of drugs.

4. SPRED - Special Programme for the Religious Education of the people with learning disability. 3 women from SPRED Groups in the Roman Catholic parish, and trained by the Dominicans, told us of the joy that this group is, and the way in which their own faith has developed through sharing with those who have learning disabilities. This meeting was different from the others in that we have an already identifiable possibility for this kind of work. Some of the residents from 47 Somerton Road – a residential centre for people with learning disabilities - meet with us for worship every week. It seems to me that they are a gift from God which we should not turn away from. We have much to learn from them and they from us.

5. WAVE.[1] Wave is a growing organisation offering support, friendship and counselling to those bereaved through violence. They have acquired new premises, which are in the process of renovation. In the interim they would be grateful for the use of our halls when possible.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the process, and the preparation work which I did with those who were taking part, was the positive attitude that they all had towards the church. No one gave any indication that the church is an outdated institution with nothing to offer to the community at large. All of them saw that the church has a role to play. This attitude of welcome stands in contrast to the deep sense of disempowerment that churches generally feel. When the issue of the lack of contact with the community is raised, churches often retreat in despair, when in fact we should advance in confidence that we will be welcomed. We need to begin to believe that we can make a significant contribution. In our post modern world this contribution is on equal player terms. The church has to offer input on the same basis as anyone else and has to carve out its particular niche. We can no

longer presume that if we are there, people will come to us. Community life no longer revolves around the church.

The way forward is more difficult. The beginning of our reflection should be in the welcome that is extended to us from the community. It comes to us, I believe, as the call of God to take our place in the world which God has given to us all. However, the issues raised as we seek to respond are anything but easy to deal with.

1. How do we make our buildings available? What will it mean to have people coming and going on the premises? How will that coming and going be managed?
2. What changes are needed in the structure to make the building accessible and useful? Where will the money come from? What will it mean for us to let go of the building as we know it - or is that totally unthinkable?
3. What kind of worshipping community will be become or should we become?

It is always difficult to balance memory and vision. I use those terms instead of the better-worn terms 'past and future'. To use these terms - past and future - is to disconnect the two when they are actually closely interwoven. When we speak in terms of memory we speak on terms of the faith into which we have grown and the developing response that is ours when the call of God persists in coming to us. Memory can be debilitating when we imagine a future which is like the past, but it can be liberating when we remember that the church has been significant in people's lives and in the life of the community. Such memory urges us to believe that the church can be significant again. Vision is frightening when it seems that it will involve letting go of all that is held dear. It is enlivening when it is viewed as part of the challenging, invigorating journey which God has called us, as His pilgrim people, to follow. Sustenance for adaptation to our times comes from both memory and vision and the two must work together to move us on into God's place for us.

A Model For Being The Church

When Elie Wiesel was liberated from Auschwitz he went to live in Paris and there he chose not to speak of his experience for 10 years. He did not know how to speak without betraying his brothers and sisters. He did not know how to speak in a way which would keep his listeners from the trite claims that they understood. He did not know how to speak but he came to believe that to fail to speak was in some way to dishonour his colleagues and friends and to permit the risk that such a thing could happen again. In reflection on Elie Wiesel's life and writing Robert McAfee Brown considers the importance of the telling of the story. He acknowledges all the difficulties but in the end concludes that the telling of the story permits the inhabiting of worlds not known to us. In listening to the storyteller the world of the people whose story is told becomes accessible, although not entirely known, to the listener. It permits the listener to inhabit the world in this case of the people who found themselves in the concentration camps. It seems to me that this metaphor of inhabiting the world of others is what we as church are about. We are seeking to inhabit the world of the groups whom we have met so that we may understand how we as a Christian church can respond. But there is more than that, for in listening we also, in some way, permit them to inhabit our world. (We were specific in inviting each group to come to worship with us and they took up that opportunity and took part in the services) When the gospel inhabits the world the dynamics of that world are changed. The power bases are challenged; the hopelessness is heard and taken on board; the anonymous world of which we despair becomes a community of persons like us. So in our listening, we too permit others to inhabit our world and in this inhabiting the gospel takes up its home. The writer of John's gospel wrote,

> ***The Word became flesh and lived among us, (John 1:14)***

or as *The Message* translation puts it,

> ***The Word became flesh and blood***

and moved into our neighbourhood.

This was precisely what he was writing about - inhabiting one another's worlds. In Christ God came to inhabit our world and permit us to inhabit the world of God. It was to change the dynamics of history forever, and this changing dynamic is the one which is to compel Christian people in their witness from now on. How each Christian community will respond in practical terms will depend on each individual situation, each context. But the core is the same. We inhabit the world and the world inhabits us and the place of meeting is the place of incarnation.

UPDATE - SEPTEMBER 2005

Since the Community Consultation a mission outreach organisation has been established for the congregation, known as *The Partnership in Community Transformation.* Formally constituted in 2002, this organisation is led by Fortwilliam Park Presbyterian Church in full partnership with Holy Family Roman Catholic Parish. These lead partners are joined by a number of community groups, five local schools, the Indian Community Centre and the North Belfast Sport's Forum. As a partnership the members are committed to 'faithfully building relationships for interdependent communities'. The Partnership in Community Transformation is open to any group who can demonstrate commitment to their core values and are willing to work within a faith-based, church-led organisation. The core values reflect the restorative ethos of the partnership which has developed a restorative justice model for work with schools, community groups and churches and focuses in delivering training and education, developing peer mediation programmes and providing restorative conferencing opportunities. As a separately constituted organisation The Partnership in Community Transformation is able to access funding which would not otherwise be open to churches. Funding has been secured to employ two full-time mediation workers, a project manager and an office administrator. Partnerships outside Northern Ireland have

been developed with the Mennonite Church from which a Canadian family have joined to work with us for three years, and the Presbyterian Church USA who provide a Young Adult Volunteer annually. While the work has grown considerably, there is always a concern about funding and the future. Securing funding from outside the partners is a challenge. However, securing enough commitment from the partners to have them provide the funding or to assist in the provision of funding, is a significantly greater challenge. For the churches, the emphasis is on serving the community and so expectations of financial commitments are low. The organisation is constantly confronted by decisions about balancing the perceived needs of partners and the agreed goals of the organisation. These are reviewed regularly by management, directors and the churches involved.

[1] When it was founded, WAVE stood for – Widows Against Violence Empower. However, as the group gained significance it reached out to many impacted by the years of violence, including widowers, children, parents and other family members. WAVE remains as a recognisable identification for a group now defined as a group for Victims of the Violence.

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